

Passion's Prisms

The background of the entire cover is a romantic scene. In the center, a man and a woman are shown in silhouette, embracing and kissing. They are positioned in front of a large, bright, circular light source, possibly a full moon or a setting/rising sun, which casts a warm glow. The sky around them is a mix of deep blues, purples, and pinks, with numerous small, sparkling stars and light rays scattered throughout. The overall mood is dreamy and romantic.

Tales of Love & Romance

WPaD

Passion's Prisms

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By WPaD (Writers, Poets and Deviants)



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Introduction

Mandy White

Love can be many things.

For some, it's sweet and sensual. For others, it's tragic and painful. There are as many sides to love and romance as there are souls to experience them. Just as a prism transforms a beam of light into all the colors of the rainbow, love blooms to its full potential, taking on a different shade with every heart through which it passes.

The stories and poetry in this book are as diverse as their composers. You will find a bit of everything in here, from tenderness, sensuality and magic to the inevitable darker sides of romance – pain, tragedy and deceit.

We are WPaD (Writers, Poets and Deviants), a group of writers from all over the world who have come together to collaborate on a series of themed charity anthologies. A portion of royalties will be donated to Multiple Sclerosis research in support of a fellow writer who lives with MS.

Passion's Prisms is our salute to romance, presented for your enjoyment.



Advice From a Hopeful Romantic

A.K. Wallace

We love. We hurt. We mend. We fall.

We each have been willing participants in this same dance for longer than is known, with minor alterations each time. The only real question ever being, "How long?" with no answers available, until it's too late. Despite the brief story, each chapter is longer than the last, filled with more than most will ever experience in their lifetime, with the hope in those pages serving to warm even the coldest of hearts, teaching what was once believed lost. Even during the trying times, there was never a lack of love or desire. The depths and purity of both served to reassure during the darkest of days while also suffocating the brightest. The beloved bond has become its own prison.

But then it never fails to happen. There comes a time, out of the blue, when you reflect on your past. Good. Bad. Happy. Not so happy.

* * *

You replay events in your mind and wonder if little alterations would have made any difference in the ultimate outcome. Are you better off today for the decisions made yesterday? If you could do it over, would you? It really doesn't matter because it's in the past.

We spend our lives searching for completion... Oneness with another... Love... Yet are never satisfied because we are impatient, impulsive and demanding. We invest in material items instead of relationships that can accompany us into our future because *things* we can see and possess. We are flawed, but seek pristine beauty in others, seldom acknowledging the perfection in another's imperfections.

* Be thankful for your experiences, regardless of any pain that may have accompanied them.

* Be grateful for the opportunities offered even if you didn't take them.

* Be at peace with the life you have now even if it isn't the one you thought you wanted.

* Live life to the fullest because it's fleeting.

* Laugh until you cry because it's the most beautiful sound ever.

* Love with everything you are because to do any less is a travesty.

* Never give up your dreams even if it looks hopeless because sometimes they become reality.

* Listen with your heart as well as with your ears because you are liable to hear the most important unspoken words of all.

* Take a chance because there are times when the risk is so very much worth it.

Time is the ultimate equalizer and everything always works out in the end.



Dance With Desire

Suzanne Parlee

The dance begins
sultry winds
feed the
flames
searching, reaching
burning the
blame

The music remembers
swirling notes like embers
feed the
soul
starving, hungry
make me
whole

The reddish glow
of a burning fire
feeds my
desire

touching, caressing
licking my thighs
higher

The scorching heat
over my skin
feed my
sin

moving, melting
my passion
...within



Ode to a Greek God

Marla Todd

I'd been six thousand years at the top of my game. I knew it was too good to last.

I was having breakfast on my deck overlooking the Pacific Ocean with the perfect amount of salty warm breeze drifting over me. A beautiful redheaded woman was still in my bed and I could still feel the warmth of her skin against mine. Fortunately she'd be gone in an hour.

I was having coffee and some amazing cheese and apple pastries my son dropped off that morning. I was also checking out a box Pan had dropped off with the pastries. That's my son, Pan, the famous happy-go-lucky satyr who danced through the woods making merry. That's over. He settled down about 150 years ago with a wood nymph named Gloria and they've been keeping domestic bliss ever since. I never thought I'd see the day.

Anyway, they were cleaning out some closets and found some stuff I'd swiped a few years ago. Thirty-four years ago to be exact.

It looked like I'd gone into the backpack of a college girl. I'd been in college mode that year for a change of pace. I was young, buffed and blue-eyed with a killer smile. Female heads all turned in my direction.

In the box was a silver hair clip in the shape of a flowering tree branch, a delicate sexy lacy cream-colored underwire bra size 32C, a seashell and a folded up piece of college ruled notebook paper. I unfolded the paper and read the words that would change my life.

It was a poem, written in blue felt-tip pen in a round, girlish script. No name identified the writer. I started to read, expecting the usually silly girlish babble

about the meaning of life, teen angst and the horrible nature of never being understood.

What I read was something else entirely:

As I stood upon the steps,
Halfway between the land and sea
The messenger god Hermes
Came to me,
Swift footed and bright
But somewhat overtaken
By his cousin Dionysus' last visit
He brought me a message
And I read it through his blue eyes
"I bring you myself," he said.
No answer came from my lips
Except a kiss,
Which spoke very clear.
Oh happy was I,
When hand in hand
Under the stars we ran
For my mythical Hermes
Turned into a man

I took a gulp of coffee and stared at the poem. A poem about me? People had written poems about me, of course, but this was personal. It was a poem about ME, not a god of tales and lore but about ME, Hermes. It was about ME.

This girl knew me. I mean she KNEW me. She knew who I was. How? I never let on to any mortal to who or what I am. Never.

She wrote me a poem. It wasn't a great poem. It wasn't even a good poem. It wasn't epic. But by my father Zeus, it was tender and sweet, full of the promise of love.

It was happy. It was from her heart. A heart that considered me more than just a good body and maybe a great fuck, if I did indeed fuck her. I know I must have kissed her. I must have made love to her, because a girl who wrote the poem would never just fuck a guy. She'd have made love to me in a way I should have remembered, but damn it I couldn't remember a thing.

A kiss. I tried to recall it. Such a kiss I should have remembered. It should have burned on my lips. It should have taken my immortal breath away. I sat, going through all of the dusty file drawers in my brain trying to remember, but NOTHING came to mind.

Don't get me wrong; I am usually NOT the romantic type. I love women but I refuse to be the kind of guy or god who is going to turn into a jellied mass of so much romantic bullshit over just any female. Or am I? My stomach knotted up. My head spun. My heart beat faster. I thought I was going to throw up.

By the way, I am Hermes, the messenger god. I go by a lot of names but my friends and family and people who worship me call me Hermes. The Romans called me Mercury, but that is a completely different story, one I'd like not to bring up right at this moment.

So I closed my eyes to *THINK*. Thirty-four years. I tried to get a face. A location. Who the hell wrote that poem? There was a ski trip to Aspen and another to Tahoe. An uneventful week in Miami brought back no memories. Of course there were trips to Greece and Paris. The summer was spent in San Francisco and a little north of there was the beach house. Fall brought on New York and Boston. I was in Vermont for the holidays with my family (I know what you're thinking and yes, we do get together for the holidays just like any other large dysfunctional family).

I heard a car start and looked back to the side of the house. The redhead drove away in her red BMW. I wouldn't see her again. She got what she wanted and was happy. Fine with me.

Up the drive walked my cousin Dionysus, who happened to be staying at my brother Apollo's place next door. There again, he was the PARTY GOD. Now he had turned into Mr. Bottle Shock. Always going up to Napa, Sonoma, Amador or jetting over to France, Australia, and all corners of the Earth for wine tastings. The guy had been going on about Lodi wines so much lately that I wanted to smack him until I tried them. He was right; it *was* the nectar of the gods. But really – Lodi? Have you been to Lodi? Despite all of that he was still my best friend.

He read the poem. "Halfway between the land and the sea. She was at the beach house you dork."

"Do you remember her?"

"Yes I remember her."

"Who was she?"

"Miranda. Quiet girl with the pretty blue-green eyes. She was cute enough."

"I'm trying but I don't have a face yet."

Dionysus poured himself a cup of coffee, added about a gallon of milk to it and half a cup of sugar before sitting down.

"She drove a beat-up old MG Midget. You talked cars. She was impressed by your Porsche. The two of you hung out all weekend making small talk. Saturday night you went for a walk on the beach and she had sex with you. You thought she was sweet. Remember? She was getting ready to go off to UCLA for the fall. You told her you were going to Harvard."

Pictures, smells, sound and feelings started to flood my brain.

“She’d been there for several weekends. We always ended up talking on the porch,” I said, as images started to come back into my brain.

“Right. She liked you a lot but she didn’t come out and hunt you like the other chicks always did. It wasn’t until that last weekend that you acted on it.”

I remembered. She was a cute, somewhat pretty seventeen-year-old girl with long brown hair and aquamarine eyes. At a party she wouldn’t have been the girl all the guys were after, but I noticed her. Well, she noticed me first. She started out talking to me about cars. From cars we talked about the tides and the ocean and movies and music and school. She wanted to travel to Nepal and spend time in Europe. Most of her friends were moving on to different colleges but she seemed all right with it. Her mind was set towards the future. I liked her company but she didn’t indicate at all that she wanted true love or a lasting relationship.

We walked on the beach. I made a few jokes and she laughed. She said a few things that were so funny it surprised me. I kissed her and a few hours later we made love by the base of a cliff in a private isolated area of the beach. She didn’t howl at the moon or put on a show. She wasn’t a virgin either.

Miranda let me take the lead but followed with quiet perfection. She lost herself quietly in the moment (which, by the way, lasted a good hour) and in me and didn’t ask for more. She could kiss too, and had an amazing body. What more could a young man want?

We walked back to the house to join our friends and she never said a word about it. The next morning she

gave me her number and said, “Call me,” knowing full well the chances of me doing that were slim to none.

I never called her back.

Now, I sat alone in my anguished romantic Hell. She’d written a poem that morning and I’d stolen it along with a few other items to remember my lovely weekend. The god of thieves had taken a token of love she’d dared not share with me and for thirty-four years I had no idea what she’d written on that piece of folded up note paper.

“Where is she now?” I asked Dionysus, knowing if he didn’t know he’d find out.

He pulled out a large wine glass; the big kind used for reds and filled it with water.

“Take a look, Hermes. But you might not like what you find. I guarantee you that one like her isn’t sitting around pining for the boy who got away.”

Images and information started to swirl in the glass. And I guarantee you, it sounds primitive, but you get a lot better information in a wine glass than you’ll ever get on Google.

Miranda had earned a doctorate degree in Genetics from UCLA and an MBA from Stanford. She was currently the Director of Development for a Biotech firm in Northern California. The husband was an advocate for foster youth and had been a public defender for twenty years. They’d produced two lovely children, one of each – eleven-year-old girl and thirteen-year-old boy. Both in swim club, good students, got along, popular, no problems. Lots of friends with kids, vacations and barbeques. Her home was in a fairly upscale neighborhood but not too pretentious. They went wine tasting often and liked to cook. My kind of mortals, if you don’t mind me saying. The husband even built sort of a

wine cellar in the basement. She also liked to build garden sculptures but the visuals were blurred.

“Like whirly gigs?” I asked, thinking of pink flamingos with wildly spinning wings and little figures of men chopping wood. The idea was too weird to digest.

“Kinetic yes, but more large found items, tiles, wood, paint,” answered my cousin.

“Like the Watt Towers?”

“Not that extreme. More like something out of Sunset Magazine. Understated with a touch of rustic charm.”

Enough of the garden shit. “What’s the relationship like with the husband? What is he? Some middle-aged Viagra popper?”

Dion gave me a smile, like the kind you’d give someone who just said something incredibly stupid. “Hermes, I’m surprised at you. The husband doesn’t need Viagra. He functions quite well on his own.”

“I didn’t need to know that. Did she ever write HIM a poem?”

“The husband? No. You’re the only one she has ever written about.”

“Does she still write anything?”

“She just finished a novel. It’s a mystery romance sort of deal.”

“Can you get me a copy?”

“Sure. I’ll call her up tonight and ask her to email it to me,” he said with a slight touch of sarcasm in his voice.

“Am I in it?” I asked too urgently, hoping the answer would be a definite YES.

“I have no idea but I seriously doubt it.”

“Is she looking to publish it?”

“As we speak. This is her dream, Herm. She wants to be published before her kids get into high school so she can be home more with them.”

How could any woman with such a romantic soul, who wrote a poem to a god end up where she was? I wondered.

“What the fuck is she doing in Biotech?” I asked my cousin.

Dionysus shrugged. “A growing and diverse field with fulfilling opportunities to make the world a better place. She loves it but after twenty-five years of it she is ready to move on, maybe be a consultant but her family is everything to her.”

I looked into the glass again and saw her as she was at present. The brown hair was a little shorter, falling slightly below her shoulders and it was lighter with blonde highlights. She was dressed stylishly in one of those cute little sweater sets all the women were wearing, with a slim skirt and flats with bows. The fact that she wore bows on her shoes turned my body to so much more jelly. I remembered she always wore some bit of fluff or frill along with her Levis and rag wool sweaters. The aquamarine eyes sparkled with little signs of aging. She laughed out loud, filling the room with joy. How could someone be so happy working in a science lab? How could someone be so happy without *me*?

The glass told me she was known for her humor and mirth. I hardly saw any of it thirty-four years ago. How could I have been so blind?

To make matters worse was the fact that she was beautiful. Fifty-one years of lovely female bliss aged to perfection – like the most exquisite and complex wine ever made. She was something to be savored. She was

something to be lingered over and enjoyed slowly with great appreciation.

I wanted her so bad I ached.

I'm not the kind of guy, or god for that matter, who turns himself into an animal (like dear old dad) to trick a woman. I'm not going to do anything to hurt or use a woman. If a woman wants to use me, then fine, I'll let her, but that doesn't make me a bad guy.

But I guess I was the perfect asshole to Dr. Miranda Wilkenson Hobbs. She wrote me a poem and I never called her.

I looked up at my cousin. "What was it like before she met the perfect husband?"

He shrugged. "She traveled a bit. Worked a lot. Dated a lot. Had a couple of serious relationships but nothing she couldn't walk away from. She met her husband 16 years ago at a party."

"Did she write him a poem?" I asked.

"No. Nothing."

"Nothing. Any hang ups with old boyfriends?"

"None. She's still friends with a few. They're all married with kids. Nothing unusual. She didn't write them any poetry either."

I conjured up an image of the husband in the glass. Average to nice looking middle-aged man. Full head of black hair, sparkling bright blue eyes, slightly crooked nose but with one of those warm and fuzzy charm filled smiles that women love. A nice, slightly better than average guy who could in no way compare to me. No way. Not enough for her to write him poetry.

Asshole bastard.

During the following weeks I pulled strings and called in favors that sent Miranda's book right into the waiting hands of Bryan Woods, literary agent

extraordinaire. By the way, Bryan Woods was the name I went by when I spent those weekends at the beach house thirty-four years ago.

When she received my call I couldn't believe how good it was to hear that lovely voice. Why, of course she could meet me. Where? I made arrangements in San Francisco.

She'd have to drive to the big city, which was A) always a treat for her, B) a few hours from her home and away any distractions, and C) a most romantic spot for seduction.

It was a beautiful day in the city with clear skies and a high of sixty-eight degrees Fahrenheit. I wore gray Armani and my Rolex Daytona (yellow gold), and of course, a Hermes tie. The blonde highlights in my hair were perfect and natural. The smile was a zillion watts. The eyes sparkled blue as a Maxfield Parrish sky.

I picked a restaurant with impeccable service and food, an excellent wine list and a spectacular view of the Golden Gate Bridge.

Exactly at noon, Miranda showed up. She scanned the room and saw me with a slight hint of recognition. She'd dressed with careful thought as women do. A flattering and pretty pink tweed suit over a pink silk blouse with high t-strap shoes – so classic and sexy I nearly laughed out loud with joy.

She smiled and took my outstretched hand. I led her back to our table. There was the usual required small talk about the drive over, the weather, etc etc etc.

We ordered wine and food. I told her how impressed I was with her book. By the way, I *was* impressed. The woman could write a story. We spoke of publishing and possible options and contracts. I told her I could see a movie deal coming out of all of it. No lies

there. After a flurry of animated conversation we suddenly stopped.

Then she looked at me with slightly squinted eyes and asked, "Have we met before?"

I said, "The beach house."

"Oh my goodness. That was you," she said, looking slightly embarrassed.

"We made love on the beach."

She glanced down unable to meet my eyes for a moment then took a sip of wine and looked up at me again.

"We were just kids. Wow, that was a long time ago. Small world. Um, it's good to see you again. You've obviously done well for yourself."

"So have you, dear Miranda." I put the piece of notepaper with the poem in front of her. "Read it."

She read it but her reaction wasn't what I thought it would be.

"Where did you get this?" she demanded.

"I took it from your backpack."

"It wasn't yours to take."

"You wrote it about me."

"Just because we... Bryan, this was private. You betrayed my trust in the absolute worst way."

"It's Hermes."

"It wasn't yours to take."

"I'm Hermes. My real name is Hermes, not Bryan. On some level you had to know. Tell me you knew."

It was as if she didn't hear a word I said.

"Yes, it was about you but the poem was mine," she said, "you were not supposed to see it." She was clearly upset, not in a crying angry way but in a calm and collected rage.

“How did you know?” I asked calmly, trying to soothe and comfort her.

“Because you shrugged it off the next day like nothing ever happened. I really liked you a lot but oh well. Shit happens.”

I took her hand. “But it did happen Miranda. You and me. You wrote a poem about us.”

“Guess what? It happened a long time ago. I’m not that girl anymore,” she said, obviously not following my lead as she pulled her hand away from mine.

“Obviously. How did you know that I am Hermes?”

“You were cute and light on your feet. You made me think of Hermes. Jeez, Bryan. Is that why I’m here? If this isn’t about my book...”

I put my hand on hers again. “I didn’t mean to upset you. But yes, Miranda, I am the messenger god Hermes. Hear me out. I only use the name Bryan Woods when I mix with mortals. Your poem touched me to the very soul and to my bones in a way that nothing else has ever touched me. Nobody has ever written anything so personal to me or about me before. I’m sorry I overlooked you. I am sorry I never called back. I’m sorry that it has taken so long for me to tell you that I love you.”

“I should go,” she said, trying to pull her hand away and starting to stand up.

“No,” I protested, still holding her hand as I transported her to another time and place.

I took her to a beach. The air was cool and breezy not too cold. She was barefooted, wearing a sweeping filmy dress of lavender and white that highlighted her curves. Her hair blew lightly in the ocean breeze.

I wore a romantic poet's shirt, sleeves rolled up, halfway open to show my spectacular chest.

Against the cliff was a bed piled high with romantic white on white pillows and flowing curtains off of high bedposts. Pink garlands of fresh roses wound around the bedposts. It was one of her dream sort of things.

Miranda looked around 360 degrees at her surroundings, completely ignoring me. Her eyes narrowed at the sight of the bed. She turned to me, a total lack of expression on her lovely face except for an angry fire in her aquamarine eyes.

I put my arm around her waist and pulled her close, then buried my face in her hair.

"It's been too long," I said.

She pushed away. "What the hell is going on? Did you put something in my drink?"

"I told you I'm Hermes. You're in my world now," I said.

I grabbed her wrists. I would have her. She would submit and enjoy every bit of it and then be glad she was mine. Or so I thought.

She twisted to get away and stomped on my foot. We lost balance and went down to the sand. I was still holding her wrists as I landed on top of her. I could have taken her then and there as I lay between her legs, but I didn't. Not with Miranda.

"Let's move it to the bed," I said gently, my lips meeting hers.

"No, I'm not going to do this. Please. Don't make me do this." Tears welled in her eyes.

I felt a knot in my stomach and then a wave of nausea swept over me. I rolled over onto my back, letting her go. The day was not going as planned.

She got up and walked down the beach some distance then stopped dead in her tracks. She stared at the surf, where the sea serpents were out, wrestling. They were as big as humpback whales with all the teeth, big eyes and claws one would expect from them. She froze, and then looked back at me.

“Sea serpents,” I said, catching up with her. “Listen Miranda, I’m really sorry. Yes, I’m an arrogant son of a bitch. When I read the poem I thought just for a moment that... no it was more than a moment. Nobody has ever cared like that.”

She didn’t hear a word I said as she stood, transfixed on the sea serpents. They roared and crashed into each other in kitten-like play. Green, blue and gold scales sparkled in the sunlight.

I put my arm around her shoulders. “Magnificent creatures aren’t they?”

“Will they come after us?”

“No. They pretty much stay to themselves.”

“This is amazing. Are they real?”

I turned her around and looked into her face. “Yes, they’re as real as I am.” Taking her face in my hands, I kissed her. She didn’t fight me, but didn’t exactly jump into my arms either.

“We’re at that point between the earth and the sea.” I kissed her again. She stepped back and crossed her arms. This was going to be more difficult than I thought.

“You’re Hermes. The god Hermes.”

“Yes. I am Hermes.”

“You’re real.”

“I am.”

I expected her to kiss me or something now that she realized who and what I was. She turned away from

me and looked at the sea serpents again then looked back at me.

“I wish my kids could see this.”

“My children always loved it when I took them to see the sea serpents. They still do,” I said, suddenly, thinking that I’d done well by my children and their mothers. In these modern times, we’d be a typical blended family. Go figure.

Miranda didn’t say anything, but kept looking out to the sea.

“This could all be part of your life, Miranda. Few mortals ever see this. I’m willing to make you part of this.”

“I can’t.”

“You’d give up immortality?”

She gave me a look that would have killed any red-blooded mortal. I watched her take off again down the beach.

I suddenly understood that she’d never love me in the way I wanted her to. Honestly, I did. Of course, understanding and acceptance are two different things. I ran after her and caught her by the arm, spinning her around to face me.

“Miranda, stop,” I said, trying to reason with her.

“What about my book?” she demanded.

“What about it?” I spat back at her.

“Did you like it, or were you just saying that to get me here?”

“It could be a best seller.”

She glared at me. “I won’t sleep with you to get it published.”

I was slightly offended but saw her point. “That isn’t good business, Miranda. You should know that. Your book is good enough to publish without sex.”

“I know it is. But as my agent, can you get me a good deal and top posting on Amazon and book and posters in the window of Barnes and Noble? Can you get me on the bestseller lists? Can you get me an interview with the New York Times and NPR?”

“I’m your agent now?” I asked.

“Yes, I mean don’t you want to be?” she asked, looking at me like I was stupid or something.

“What about your Biotech job?”

“I’ll keep working until the royalty checks start coming in,” she snapped.

I put my hand on her shoulder, ever so gently. “I’ll get you a six figure advance. You can quit your job tomorrow if you want.”

Her face softened. I could feel her shoulders relaxing. “Really? You’d do that?”

“Of course I would. I’ll be your agent but you have to do something for me.” If I couldn’t have her love, I’d get something almost as good out of her.

She squinted her eyes at me. “What?”

“You have to write about me.”

“Poetry?”

“Books. The modern adventures of an ancient god.”

“I can do that.”

“I’ll have the contracts drawn up. I believe you’ll like the terms.”

“I’m sure I will.”

“One day, I will make love to you again.”

She finally smiled. “Don’t count on it.”

“Let’s go back.” I closed my eyes and when they opened we were back in San Francisco. The restaurant (which by the way, I own) was empty of any other

customers. Fresh blackberry pie and freshly made vanilla ice cream were on the table along with coffee.

The sun was starting to set over San Francisco Bay. We talked about our lives and our kids for about another hour or two. It was so easy with the elder Miranda.

"You're going to get caught in some pretty nasty traffic." I told her in my most concerned and caring voice. "You can stay the night here with me."

"It's ok," she said, "I have a couple of audio books in the car."

I walked her out to her car, a blue 2010 Mustang convertible. I should have known she'd still have a convertible.

I didn't want to let her go. "Miranda, I'm sorry I was a jerk. I didn't know how you felt about me. Another time and place and we could have..."

She put her finger to her lips as if telling a child to be quiet. "Listen Bryan, I mean Hermes. I'm sorry it didn't work out the way you imagined it but I have a good feeling about this, about us. I really do. We'll make a good partnership and maybe even become friends. I take that back. We will become friends. Okay?"

Friends usually means the kiss of death in a relationship, but not this one.

"You'll write about me," I said, not as a question.

"I will write about you, Hermes." She put her hand on my waist, stood on her toes and kissed me. "I will write wonderful things about you that everyone will want to read."

I opened the car door for her.

"I'll fax over the contracts in the morning. Drive safe Miranda."

Late into the wee hours of the morning, I sat on the balcony overlooking the bay and thought of her kiss that lingered on my lips.

The messenger god Hermes had indeed turned into a man.



Deep Wood Shade

Diana Garcia

deep wood shade shadows my skin
when you touch me
this glow from within
your sun pumps radiant fluids
into my parched earthiness
as always, my rivulets seek
your bigger waters
the pounding oceans
fragile seas
dappled fragrance seeps
just beneath
the scent of us
and undulates
I undulate
snakelike
loathe to shed you from me
stay, and dig into the sands with me,
my love
if you go
I will be an empty house
damaged by your hurricane
bereft
blown
forgotten
sand the color of patina
shadowed in deep wood,
untouched



Letter to a Lost Love, dated 1910

(Letter in an old strongbox which was buried and found in Monterrey, Mexico/currently held in the Museo de Historia de Nuevo Leon/Translated to English from Spanish)

My Dearest Dominico,

I hope and pray to God and the saints that this letter finds you although I heard some of Madero's men were caught and imprisoned in San Luis Potosi. If you are in chains, my love, please know that I am with you in spirit and that I will love you for a thousand years. I understand and fully support that you followed Francisco Madero into revolution. My love, my life, you and I have talked about this. Porfirio Diaz, must be stopped and our people shall overcome the terrible injustices imposed upon our people.

Our families, mine and yours, were so proud of you the day you completed your university degree with honors. I can see you now, standing before me so proud. So tall. So handsome in your father's old suit. I long to kiss those luscious lips and to touch your thick lashes with my tongue as you so liked in our quiet moments. Our secret moments. The hopes we had! How were we to know the railway job you had hoped for and, which was promised to you, would go to French or American personnel? I did not care! I wanted us to be married before the storm I knew in my heart was yet to come. Yes, I knew this terrible storm, or as you called it "this volcano" was the change for social reform. I felt it deep in my bones. We all felt the impending surge. It caused such nightmares, such sadness. This feeling that things will never be the same again. The feeling that we would never

be was a pull and gnawing upon my brain and grew heavy in my soul, like a hideous demon that could not be exorcised. This “volcano” would pull us apart, forever. At this moment I feel rather than be fearful I should have greeted all my days I spent with you with relish and joy and thrown all caution and premonitions to the wind.

You and your friends were left out in the cold, educated, but unemployable for being Mexican! Oh, how I watched the change in you. It was palpable. We all knew the social change and the call for reform was inevitable. I recall those nights when you dragged me to those secret meetings where we heard Obregón talk about agrarian and labor reforms for the people. The fever of our desire for change was infecting all of us, the obrero, the peon, the laborers, and like our families, the rancheros. The discussions, arguments, and talk about so much of Mexico’s industry being owned by foreigners were truly explosive. When I once asked you, “Mi amor, what do the foreigners own?” You fired back with passionate rage in your eyes, “They own the railways, copper mines, textile mills and the oil fields! The proletariat slaves thirteen hours a day for mere centavos! These foreign pigs hold back the workers’ wages while their own country’s wealth increases! How long must we let this go on?” Such passion! Such rage! It made me love you more! I was infected by your fiery energy. We all were.

Remember how you dressed me in your men’s clothes? You helped bind my breasts. As I write these words I can still feel the warmth of your hands on my skin as they lingered there. Our breaths in each other’s mouths and our tortured whispers to rush and finish so you could sneak me out of the house was so exciting for me. Yet, I knew you wanted to ravish me. I wanted that too. The stolen kisses and the need to touch and feel each

other was magnetic to the point of causing us into some kind of delirium. Like a parched earth greedily drinking in the summer rains. Those moments will live forever in my memory.

The passion we felt in the heat of our anger in our chants for change there in the dark abandoned building where the people gathered. The news of the day was so exciting because Haley's Comet was soaring over Mexico. It was a portend of great changes. Little did we know it would herald a time of disaster and war for our people. We were so in awe of the heavens that night. We shared bottles of tequila and cigars as we made plans to follow the Villistas in "our" revolution. I felt like I belonged. You made me feel that way, my dear heart.

Yes, you and your friends yelled at me as I resolved to go with you to fight against injustice. I was so caught up in the frenetic energy of your masculine youth. The power of your emotions compelled me to want to fight by your side. "I can fight alongside you!" I said. You removed my hat and my long hair tumbled down to contradict my motives to act as a man so I can follow you into battle. "I can cut it!" I yelled. You and your friends just looked down or away from me in embarrassment. "I will follow you no matter what!" I yelled as I ran away into the darkness. I cried into the night. I was angry at the world for being a woman. A woman bred for piety and charity of the times, a woman of culture and propriety. I did not want to live like that. I wanted to fight for my people. I thought it was the only way to make a difference. You instilled that in me my love! That was the last time I ever saw you. Oh, how I wish I could turn back time and run into your arms and tell you how sorry I am!

Two nights later, Chita, the maid, entered my bedroom to inform me that my mother and father

summoned me to the sitting room to receive your parents who had come at that late hour for a visit. I knew at that moment you were gone from me. The minute I walked into the room all eyes turned to me. I noted the disapproving looks of my mother because I was dressed as a field worker, shunning a dress as usual. Doña Romero, your mother, ran to me and grabbed my hands and pleadingly asked me if I knew where you were. She read to us all the brief farewell letter you wrote telling us all not to worry and to convey your undying love to me.

Of course I knew what you were up to, but did not know exactly where you went. I told them I could see what I could find out. My father in his deep croaky voice said, "You will do no such thing young lady! You will remain here locked up and my men will keep guard if they have to." Then he turned to them and told them he was sorry but that I was too young to get involved in the crazy political upheavals of "today's youth." He then bade Chita to escort me back to my room. But not before Doña Romero ran to hug me and whisper urgently in my ear, "Please find out what you can!" Then Chita pulled me away from the room and my father's murderous looks.

Luckily, I did not give you back your men's clothes and as soon as Chita left my room and locked it I scrambled to dress as you had shown me. However, this time I wore my brother's boots and spurs. I cut my hair to the scalp with the knife you gave me. I know you will not like my new look but it is imperative in my disguise. I had also previously stolen one of my brother's guns. I then crawled out of my window into my future. Our love was to be my beacon to follow in my search for you. This was all the security I had, my love would find you.

As of this letter, I have not seen my family, or even know if they are alive, nor have I returned home. If you

ever see them, please tell them to forgive me and that I love them regardless of how they feel about me. I cannot bear my father's anger and shame. I am truly sorry for hurting them and for following my heart.

One thing you must know, my older brother, Miguel, joined the local mounted police. Yes, he has become one of the rurales who terrorize the countryside in search of agitators against the government. I am sure by now he found out I took his boots, spurs, and favorite gun. He and his men will hunt me down, with the blessing of my father of course. By now, my family will have disowned me and are calling me a "puta" a "desgraciada". Even so, I know I can evade those idiots because, more likely than not, they will have been drinking as they are wont to do, which is a boon for me as I know this terrain blindfolded. For that, I am thankful to you. I am remembering the times we hunted and roamed the family lands together without a care, the days of our childhood, those golden days. Our parents always knew we would marry and keep our neighboring lands together. We were all so sure those plans would fall into place. It all seems so long ago now.

I traveled on foot for a day and a half. I stayed away from any roads and lived as you taught me. I fished in a lake and I even killed a huge lizard and skinned and ate it. I was so proud of myself because I did not go hungry. People were kind and generous because they thought I was a young boy headed out to fight in this new revolution. Everywhere I went people talked about the revolution and the hope for change.

A curandera, a healer, gave me shelter one night and she prayed over me and bade me follow her instructions for a ritual of spiritual cleansing. She looked like an ancient crone with hunched shoulders and with

skin as dark as coffee. I was not afraid. She sprinkled holy water on me as she prayed soulful prayers in a raspy whisper. I knew some of the prayers so I prayed along with her. She also rubbed an egg and some lemons on my body to absorb any negative forces and then brushed me all over with rosemary, basil and rue branches to absorb the negative and evil energies. Afterwards, we drank a delicious spiced tea as she continued to pray over me. I felt enveloped with vigor and strength all the while thinking of you as she prayed. I did not pray for myself but I prayed for you, that I would find you. She was a kind woman with sorrowful eyes and she invoked God and the saints for my protection in this earthy life and beyond. When I asked her why she was doing this to me her cryptic response was, "Child, I am calling for protection for your long journey, a journey that will last you beyond this time." In the morning she begged me to stay but I left feeling rested and "protected."

One day I approached a lonely cabin in the woods approximately several towns away from where I started. Travel on foot was slow especially when I was not sure what I was doing or where I was going. Yet, somehow I felt like I knew I would find you. I just knew I would travel the ends of the earth to find you. My determined walking kept me focused. I had to find you! To fight beside you. To die by your side, in your arms if need be, and nothing would stop me.

It wasn't really a cabin but more a hut. I needed a horse. My father's men bunked in our stables so I had been unable to mount my horse, Lobo, of which I was sorely disappointed. I knocked on the cabin door and a beautiful but sickly and emaciated Yaqui woman answered the door. Her eyes told a story of pain and sorrow. She bade me stay away with hand gestures saying "cholera,"

but then she fainted and I stormed in. I picked her up and lay the woman on a mat on the dirt floor, then turned upon hearing a child's voice moaning in the candlelit darkness.

I then recognized both the mother and child. This woman was the known “puta” of Don Santiago, a Spaniard of the largest haciendado in the region. He was a cruel man. He was a man known for his severe punishment of the Yaquis and Mayan workers by either a bullet or the whip. I remember seeing both mother and child once shopping at a bustling tianguis and some of the sellers refusing to sell to her. I had traveled there with my mother as we were visiting an old aunt who lived nearby. Several months ago I had heard my father's henchmen talking about how Don Santiago had perished as a result of his stallion kicking him in the head. It was the big news at that time. Of course this left the poor beautiful Yaqui woman and her child destitute and far away from her people, and utterly despised by everyone around her. My mother and I had heard the whispers as to why this woman would be with such a man who was so cruel and hurt her own people. My mother later explained to me that she knew for a fact that this woman was forced to be with Don Santiago and that no one should judge the poor woman rather to pray for her, which we both did on our way home.

I picked up the sickly child and she looked at me with large tear-filled eyes and snuggled into me for warmth. She was the most beautiful child I had ever seen. She was an angel. She was about two years old but was very tiny and malnourished. I wrapped her in my poncho and went to nurse the mother and make her comfortable. I found her dead on the mat. Her sunken eyes were open in terror. I fell to my knees with the child in my arms and

began to cry. I had never experienced death, nor had I ever felt such utter loneliness and sadness as I felt then. I closed her eyes and covered her with a thin blanket.

The little girl died in my arms that night too. She had stared and stared at me and the last thing she did I will never forget. She brushed her tiny hand upon my cheek as she looked at me with a smile on her face, then she looked upward as if seeing something I could not see and her little head with long black hair rolled to the side, and she was gone. I sat in that dark little hut which reeked of old tallow and dung and I rocked her and sang quiet lullabies upon her warm little head. I knew then that I would never see you again. I knew then that I will never have your child. I held her and kissed her long-lashed eyes and the next morning I buried her next to her mother in back of the hut. I said prayers for their dearly departed souls to be received in the gates of heaven.

I sang,
"O *María, madre mía,*
O consuelo del mortar.
Ampararme y giarme
a tu patria celestial..."
an old Spanish hymn.

Burying the bodies had tired me to the extent that I could not make myself to leave that day. It had taken me all day long with an old broken shovel to dig a grave big enough. I was determined to give them a proper burial with prayers and singing for the glory of both of their souls.

A day later, while saddling the old swayback horse tied behind the woman's hut, I fell to my knees retching and feeling faint. I knew I was sick with the cholera. I

clawed at the dirt at my ill fortune and cried salty tears screaming your name, “Dominico! Mi amor!” I lay there in the dirt until I could regain my strength and slowly crawled back into the hut and fell upon the dead woman’s mat on the dirt.

I am currently suffering chills and a burning fever. The thirst is unbearable. I am a wretch retching uncontrollably. Although I am weak I am here writing this letter a little at a time. Each line takes an eternity to write. But thoughts of you keep me going. I am hoping and praying to regain my strength so that I can continue my quest to be with you. It is my deepest wish, my love. I yearn to complete my task. I see you in the dark dank room in my delirium and wish it to be so. I want this to be true. To touch you. To laugh with you as you hold me tight.

It has been hours since I wrote the previous line and I know that in my deep sorrow I can write no more words.

Alas, should this letter find my heart, my love, my spirit, Dominico Alvarado Romero, please tell him my last thoughts are of him and that I will search for him all of my days.

Yours until death,
Maria Luisa De Las Espadas,
18 years old.

* * *

I, Miguel De Las Espadas, Coronel, Mounted Police, do hereby attest this degenerate body and letter belongs to my sister, the disgraced, Maria Luisa De Las Espadas, daughter of Don Emilio and Maria Elena De Las Espadas. I further attest that the

scoundrel, Dominico Alvarado Romero, is currently imprisoned in San Luis Potosi, charged with treason for inciting an uprising and revolutionary actions against the government and is sentenced to die by firing squad, this day, November 20, 1910. Postscript: I further attest, said letter to remain undelivered.

Miguel De Las Espadas.

Note: This is a work of fiction. The historical persons, Madero and Obregon are true. Also, Haley's Comet was visible over Mexico in May, 1910.

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Memoria

A.K. Wallace

snuggling in bed
not quite awake
far from sleep
gentle kisses
promising caresses
exquisite gasps
satisfied moans
bittersweet memory



In Dreams...

A.K. Wallace

It had been such a long day; she'd thought it would NEVER end!

All of the moving, sorting and unpacking is finally finished; the last of her well-meaning friends have gone and now she can sit down at her own kitchen table, in her own chair, in her very own house and just relax. After the chaos of the past few days, the sound of complete silence is music to her ears.

The clouds have been gathering all day and she could have sworn she could hear thunder in the distance. There is a light breeze wafting through the open windows, with the scent of rain in the air. She decides to skip dinner, take a shower and go to bed.

* * *

She is sleeping peacefully. Then, as always, the dream comes. Each time it's the same: he's there again. Holding her. Loving her. Then, leaving her. This time, the dream feels different though; it feels... real.

She senses his nearness as he lies down next to her.

She smells his scent as he leans over her.

She feels his fingers as they brush the hair from her face.

She tastes the wine on his lips as he kisses her.

She hears the longing in his voice as he says her name.

She slowly opens her eyes and there he is, smiling in that knowing way. She's missed him; so much. He's fully aware what seeing him does to her and she knows how she affects him in return. But this is all they can have. This place between reality and fantasy: this is their sanctuary.

She draws him to her for another kiss. Soft and demanding. Gentle and probing. So much said without any words spoken.

The kisses continue, hands exploring, clothing disappears and their bodies join; two hearts in harmony...

She hears someone walking near her and, as she opens her eyes, she realizes she's in the hospital, but she's not sure what happened or how she got there. She's hurt. Everything hurts.

"Someone is here to see you. Do you feel ready for company?" She turns her head toward the voice; it is a female police officer. "Just in case you've forgotten, I'm Officer Mahoney, but you can call me Sara."

She tries to speak, but even that hurts.

“It’s okay, Sweetie; don’t push it. You were hurt pretty badly and need more time to heal. I can tell him to come back later, if you want,” Sara says.

She shakes her head.

“Okay, but he cannot stay for long. You need some rest.”

She nods.

It is faint, but she can hear Sara telling the visitor what happened. Apparently, she was beaten by someone (she couldn’t hear who) and had been in the hospital for a couple of weeks, unconscious until just the day before.

Why can’t she remember anything? It feels like the answers are right there, on the tip of her brain, but she can’t get to any of it. What happened?

Sara walks back into the room, followed by a man who seems very familiar. He looks as if he’s barely holding himself together and has been crying very recently.

“I’m going to leave you two alone for a little bit while I get some coffee and I won’t be gone very long. I’m bending quite a few rules by even letting this meeting happen. Sweetie, you’re in protective custody until the doctors release you. Don’t look like that! You didn’t do anything; this is for your own safety,” Sara says before she turns to the visitor. “We’ve already gone over everything. Take good care of her while I’m gone and don’t upset her,” she says pointedly.

It’s amazing how a person in uniform can be reassuring when they want to be.

“I’m sorry! I should have been here to stop him. He never should have been able to come near you. I am so sorry!” he says with a mix of fear and anger.

She reaches out to draw him closer and whispers, "It's okay. You didn't know. Nobody did. Everything will be fine now because you're here."

In that instant, she remembers everything; including who assaulted her and why. She also knows she is finally safe...

They're sitting in a coffee shop, huddled over their respective cups, both trying to find a safe topic to discuss. He's fidgeting with a napkin while she's gripping onto her mug for dear life.

"It's nice here, isn't it?" she asks timidly.

"Yes," he replies. After taking a deep breath, he says, "I need to ask you something."

"You know you can ask me anything," she says.

"Do you love him?" he asks directly.

She looks up and with a little smile and says, "No," before looking back down at the coffee, still tightly clutched in her hands.

He sighs and then asks, "Do you love me?"

This time she takes a deep breath, looks up once again catching his eye, smiles and says, "I never stopped..."

She has her head on his shoulder and they are holding hands while watching a movie. She grabs her phone to make a quick note when he takes it away.

"No work tonight," he says sternly, but with a hint of a smile. "If it's something good, you'll still remember it later. Watch the movie."

"You know I hate when you do that," she sighs.

"I know. Now watch," he chuckles.

She reaches out to take the phone; he slaps her hands away, points to the television and says, "Movie now and work later."

She smiles at his unspoken challenge and makes a move once again to take the phone when he suddenly grabs her, pinning her to the couch.

"If you can't behave and watch this movie with me, then I guess I'll need to find another way to distract you from working, won't I?" he growls as he stretches out his long frame over her and before silencing her protests with a hungry kiss...

* * *

The sound of the doorbell jolts her from a sound sleep. As she stumbles through the house, she tries to remember her dreams, but nothing except fuzzy pictures are flitting through her mind.

She reaches the living room and sees a man outside her window. He looks very familiar. As she opens the front door, she realizes he is the man who has been haunting her dreams!

"Hi. I'm Dooley. I live next door and noticed you moving in yesterday; thought, maybe, you'd be too frazzled to fix anything for breakfast so I come bearing coffee and bagels. May I come in?"

"Sure!" she sputters. "I mean, please, come in. I'm Aislinn, but everyone calls me Linn. How did you know I wouldn't have had breakfast already?"

"Well, Linn, something in my dreams told me..."



Spring into my dreams
Alight with torches on a dark autumn eve
the fecund scent of fallen leaves our bedding
raise your fevered lips to my brow
annointing me with the sacrament of your heart
A journey perilous, with traps of the past
Dancing on the razors edge

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The First Moment of a Long Love

David Hunter

I'd been having these recurring dreams, you see, ever since my divorce. For three years it persisted. I'd meet with a nameless girl, and we'd be together walking in parks, through open fields of grass and flowers, lying on breezy beaches – it was always different. And every time I woke from these reveries I'd have a moment of utter and complete happiness before realizing it was all a dream.

Those were particularly bad days. I'd go into work and barely say a word to anyone, just close the door to my office and bury myself in paperwork.

Brendan, a co-worker in the finance department, would be the one to cheer me up. He was a big red-headed Irishman with a wonderfully bombastic laugh. I always felt better around him. He was the only one who

knew about the dreams, and the best part was, he was great about it all. He never teased me.

And he knew when to proceed delicately. Not long ago, after another dream with Zooey, I had marched into the office, closed the door, and shoved myself behind my desk. Brendan knocked lightly two times, and then peeked in.

“Another dream, huh?” he said softly.

“I don’t feel like talking about it,” I said, shuffling papers around. The truth was, I did feel like talking about it. But didn’t. I suppose a psychiatrist would call that a mental paradox.

He came in, closed the door and sat down on the chair beside my desk.

“Listen, we have to go to the airport for that conference in Montreal tomorrow. Maybe it’ll take your mind off things. Montreal’s a wild town, man,” he said, smiling. “Maybe we’ll meet some nice French chicks, you know, *belles femmes sexy...*”

I finally laughed – only because his French accent was so awful.

* * *

Air Canada Flight 722 left Pearson Airport on time, and soon we were in the air heading towards Montreal and the conference. It’s no secret to those who know me, but I hate flying. That day was no exception, except Brendan’s company made me feel better. He was like the big brother and best friend all rolled into one large boisterous person.

The stewardess came by, smiling, with a tray of drinks and snacks. Brendan took a pack of peanuts and a root beer, and then proceeded to embarrass himself.

“Are you married?” he asked, “I’d love to take you out if you’re not.”

She blushed, and demurred, in her French Canadian accent, that she was spoken for. Brendan didn't care – he opened up his bag of nuts and started eating them.

"I'm amazed at you, Bren. How are you so happy? You and Lynn were divorced not two years ago, and you're already spreading your sunshine all over the continent."

Brendan, mouth full of peanuts, said, "Life's too short to be stuck in negative cycles. Besides, that flight attendant was *cute*."

I had to agree that she was.

"So tell me more about Zooey," he said.

Zooey. Just her name gave me goose bumps. Zooey was the name I had given her.

"I don't know what to tell you. She..."

Brendan turned in his seat to look at me, "She what?"

"This is hard to tell another guy, especially an Irishman."

Brendan feigned insult. "Come on, what?"

"She was perfect."

"Nobody's perfect, pal."

I sat back in my seat and smiled, thinking of her. "Maybe not, but she's perfect for me."

* * *

While waiting for our baggage, Brendan brought up Zooey again.

"I'm worried about you, buddy."

"How so?"

"You've created this woman in your dreams, your wildest fantasies, and now you're obsessing that she's really out there somewhere. I see you looking around,

hoping she's in a crowd somewhere. You need to meet a real live woman."

I turned to look at him, and I knew he was right. I felt ashamed.

"I'm just lonely, Bren." I said. "That's all."

Bren gave me a big bear hug. "I know, buddy. And you fell in love with a dream girl. Hey, it happens."

I was embarrassed to be hugged by this large Irishman in a crowded airport, but grateful too.

The conference; it was packed with accountants. I have to confess that I hate conferences almost as much as I hate flying. We mingled, traded contacts, waited for the speakers to begin. I looked at my watch and dreaded the next eight hours. I mean, I liked my job in Accounts, but wasn't really enthusiastic about listening to people speak about the subject for extended periods of time. Brendan was girl-spotting for later when drinks and food became available.

The first speaker started talking about annuities. My eyes glazed over a little. I scanned the crowd as well, for future reference.

Afterward there was food and drink, and I sat at the bar while Bren cruised the room for women, always the Casanova.

A girl, all out of breath, rushed over to the bar and sat down a few seats over. She ordered a Black Forest martini and then looked over at me with a sheepish smile.

"I missed all the speakers didn't I?" she said, laughing. "I missed my flight and got here late. My boss is going to kill me."

I must have been staring because she said, "Are you okay?"

I broke out of my reverie. "I'm fine, actually. Buy you a drink?"

She held up her martini. "Already got one!"

We talked for a long while. I got so comfortable that I started telling her about my divorce, and my dreams. She turned quiet.

"I'm sorry. I know it's a lot to drop on someone in a first encounter."

She smiled shyly. "Actually, honesty is very refreshing. But the dream thing..."

"I know, it's strange."

She confessed that she'd been having dreams too, of a faceless, nameless man. The dreams were remarkably similar.

"So you think these dreams brought us together?" I asked.

"Anything's possible, serendipity and all that."

I realized we'd been talking for hours and I hadn't introduced myself. "I'm Paul, by the way." I held out a hand and she shook it.

"Zooey," she said, smiling.

I stared again.

A few moments passed, and she said, "Is there something on my face?" and started to fiddle with her compact mirror.

"Did you say your name was Zooey?"

Just then Brendan breezed over, slightly lubricated with booze, but still coherent. He saw Zooey and stopped.

"Oh, hey, I didn't mean to interrupt anything...?"

"Brendan, meet Zooey."

Brendan turned to stare.

"Do you guys practice that mouth agape look...?" she said.

“Zooey? For real? Zooey!” He ambled over and shook her hand, then bent down to hug her. She laughed at him.

“Nice to meet you, Brendan.”

“I’m glad you turned out to be real. I was beginning to think this guy had gone bananas.”

He then fished out a ten-dollar bill and handed it back to me. He stood there, trying to keep his balance, but he was doing an admirable job. He was Irish after all. Something dawned on him though, even in his fuzzy state.

“Am I hallucinating, or are you two playing an elaborate joke on me?”

* * *

Turns out Zooey and I had met once before, many years ago, briefly. It was in Europe, the summer after graduation. I had been hiking through the French countryside, rucksack and all, when our paths crossed. She had stopped to ask me for directions to some town she and her friends were looking for. I pointed back down the road, told them how to get there. They said thank you and left. I never got her name, only that last image of her on that dusty country road, looking back at me and waving goodbye.

That was twenty-two years ago.

Funny, I always thought that moment was a dream.



Cicada Song

Suzanne Parlee

Under a sweltering sky
 we lay
 Tangled, drowsy
 sedated by the sun
Fragrance of Magnolia
 Cicadas' song
 Languid kisses
 Thirsty, wet
River of transparent azure
 enticing
 Liquid embrace
quenches heated touches



Prairie Passion

Mandy White

The verdant ocean of prairie grasses rippled in the ever-present breeze; the springtime greens had not yet made the transformation to summer's golden hue. The lone rider in the distance might have been a mirage, shimmering against the endless blue horizon. The girl had been making her short pilgrimage for several weeks, slipping away as often as possible to ride across the plains to the spot near the creek where she had first sighted the boy.

Unlike other fourteen-year-old girls of the 1890s, Sarah could get away with shirking her chores without fear of punishment because not much was expected of a young woman in her condition. Her sisters and cousins glowered at her, jealous at being left behind to do chores Sarah skipped in favor of riding her horse, Sable.

Sarah ignored the scornful looks and whispers as she rode through the settlement past the other girls, who were hard at work scrubbing pots and pans and hanging laundry.

“She rides that horse with no saddle! How barbaric!”

“She does not look ill. I think she is pretending.”

“No bonnet! Positively shameful!”

Sarah played in the sunshine without wearing her sunbonnet, rode her horse bareback and exhibited many other unladylike behaviors without being reprimanded by her elders because she wasn’t expected to live long. The doctor back in Philadelphia told Sarah’s parents she wouldn’t survive past the age of twenty at the very most but would likely succumb to her illness long before then. There was no hope of marrying her off. What man would want a woman sick with consumption? A wife incapable of pulling her weight, who would not even survive long enough to raise their children to adulthood, was useless. Hard labor aggravated Sarah’s condition, causing her to cough uncontrollably and become short of breath. According to the doctor, plenty of fresh air and non-strenuous activity for the remainder of her days was the best thing for her. Sarah was capable of doing light work like sewing but her parents didn’t force work upon her. What was the point? Any time spent teaching valuable life skills to a girl who would soon be dead was time better spent elsewhere.

They had joined several other British families in a northbound wagon train, leaving the city in search of a new life in a new land filled with opportunity. The vast fertile plains of Canada offered a lucrative opportunity for anyone interested in farming grain, a much sought-after commodity. After many long months of travel, the Worthingtons and several other families made their home in a tiny settlement on the plains, in a region that would later become known as Saskatchewan.

Sarah first encountered the boy in early April when she stopped to rest at a pretty little stream she had found during one of her rides. Sable was first to detect a strange presence. The mare was enjoying a drink when suddenly her head sprung from the water and her body stiffened. She spun around, facing upstream and making a whuffing sound through her nostrils. Her ears pointed forward toward the source of the new scent, so much that the tips nearly touched.

“Shh...” Sarah whispered. “What is it, my dear?”

She tied Sable to a nearby bit of bush and then went to investigate on foot.

A small hill obscured her view upstream. Sarah crept to the top, staying low to the ground and using the grass for cover. As she mounted the crest of the hill she heard the sound of water splashing. She lay in the grass and peeked down the slope.

The creek widened into a small pool as it flowed against the base of the hill, where a small grove of trees stood their ground at the water’s edge. A flash of white in the water drew her attention. A horse, mostly white with rust-colored splotches resembling paint splatters stood chest-deep in the water. The animal appeared to be alone. As Sarah watched, bubbles appeared beside the horse and then a glistening black head bobbed up, breaking the

surface with barely a ripple. A person had swum under the horse's belly while it stood contentedly, playing in the water as it drank.

Sarah stifled a giggle at the paint's amusing antics. The horse submerged his nose in the water all the way up to his eyes and blew bubbles, then tossed his head high, splashing his owner and curling his upper lip in a comical horsey sneer. The boy laughed aloud and dove beneath the surface once again, this time emerging on the opposite side of the animal.

He was the most beautiful boy she had ever seen. His waist-length raven hair and bronze skin told Sarah exactly what he was. He was an Indian, or 'Injun' as her uncles called his kind. The government had assured them that the savages were under control, confined to sections of land reserved especially for them. The rest of the region was ready and waiting for new settlers. Sarah wondered if her father and uncles knew the Indians were in such close proximity to their new home. She watched the boy for as long as she dared, then scurried back to her horse before her fickle cough could betray her. She mounted Sable and rode like the wind back to the settlement, checking over her shoulder several times to ensure she wasn't being followed.

Sarah didn't tell her family about the boy she had seen. She was afraid her parents would forbid her from riding away from the settlement again. She couldn't erase his image from her mind: his rich brown skin, so different from her own; the longest, sleekest, blackest hair she had ever seen. She wanted to see him again.

She returned several times to the spot where she had seen the boy but saw no sign of him save for a few unshod hoof prints in the mud of the creek bank. Then one day, he was there. She sneaked to the hillside as she

had before, trying to be as stealthy as possible but this time Sable betrayed her. The mare was in season and resented being left behind when she could smell a potential mate just around the bend. Just as Sarah reached the hilltop, Sable let out a shrill whinny, pawing the ground in frustration. The paint horse whirled toward the sound, head high, ears at attention. The boy looked around fearfully, as if expecting an attack.

Sarah knew the best thing for her to do was flee.

Instead, she stood and waved, trying to look as friendly as possible.

The boy looked nervous but clearly relieved to see the intruder was just a girl.

Sarah's heart thudded in her chest as she approached, descending the gentle slope one tentative step at a time. If she was to be captured by savages, so be it. It was too late to run away now.

Sable neighed again. The painted stallion jerked away from his distracted owner and bolted toward the sound and scent of the mare.

"Sable!"

Sarah turned and began running back to her horse, unsure of how she was going to defend the mare against the advances of a stallion with one thing on his mind.

The Indian boy followed, shouting commands at his horse in a strange language. By the time they reached the horses it was too late; the stallion had already mounted Sable and she wasn't objecting in the least. It was best to let nature take its course. Sarah turned to the boy, who now stood beside her.

"Forgive me... my horse..." she gasped, gesturing helplessly at the horses. She was unsure of what to say but decided a greeting would be the best way to start.

“Hello,” she said, though she didn’t expect him to understand.

Her jaw dropped in shock when he replied in English.

“Allo.” He grinned, revealing a brilliant mouthful of white teeth. His eyes danced, glittering like twin beads of obsidian beneath thick dark lashes. The boy’s dusky beauty stole Sarah’s breath more than her illness ever had. The elegant lines of his face and high, sculpted cheekbones were unlike any man she had seen. With no sign of facial or body hair, his age was difficult to discern but he had the lanky, lean-muscled build of a young man about sixteen years of age.

“Y-you speak English?” she stammered, nonplussed but pleased nonetheless.

The young man nodded, the playful smile never leaving his face.

“How? You’re a... a...”

He laughed. “I am *savage*? I still speak. I am like you.”

Sarah blushed. “Please forgive my poor manners. Of course you speak. I just didn’t expect you to speak *my* language. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Sarah Worthington.” Conscious of her manners for the first time in her life, Sarah bobbed a small curtsy and offered her hand for the gentleman to kiss.

The boy declined to take her hand and laughed heartily, making Sarah’s cheeks flush an even deeper shade of crimson.

“Sare,” he said. “Very nice. I am called Erod.”

“Erod? Is that an Indian name?”

He shook his head, still smiling. “No. Your words. Not Indian. I am Cree. In my words I am called Kanen.”

His thick accent reminded Sarah of the way the Dubois family spoke. The Dubois' were a French family that had joined the settlement several months ago. Sarah had found it difficult to understand them at first, until she became accustomed to their strange pronunciation of English words. This boy spoke in a similar fashion, but the accent was different from that of her French-Canadian neighbors.

"Please forgive my horse," Sarah said, "it is her time."

The boy nodded, then shrugged in resignation. "'Orse... will be 'orse." Sarah joined him when he laughed, trying to conceal her embarrassment at the intimate nature of their horses' activities. She liked the idea of Sable having a foal the following year, especially one as pretty as the Indian (Cree) boy's horse.

They left the horses to their own devices until their coupling was finished, then Sarah brought Sable to the grove of trees beside the pool where she could watch her.

The two teens sat facing each other on the grassy bank. Sarah, with her legs stretched to one side in a proper ladylike pose and the boy, cross-legged in the style of his people. Sarah was relieved to be off her feet, for she was beginning to tire and didn't want to succumb to a spell of coughing in front of her alluring new acquaintance.

"Allo, Sare," the boy said, tilting his head slightly as he appraised her with his eyes. His hair fell past his shoulder in sleek black wisps, brushing the tips of the grass blades where he sat.

"Hello... Erod. Tell me, how is it that you speak English?" she asked.

"L'ecole... school." He shrugged. "Dey take us away, put us in school. Bleck-robe teach us English.

Teach us God and give us new name. Now I am older, school finish and I sent back to family, but family in different 'ome now."

"Black robe? You mean a priest?"

"Yes, prrrreest." He rolled his R's the same way Sarah's French neighbors did.

"And the priest named you Erod?"

"Yes, from Bible. Hhh – erod." He struggled to pronounce the *H* sound. "Bleck-robe say, 'For even de savage must 'ave name'."

"Herod! Truly? That is the name he gave you? How barbaric!" Sarah tried to imagine what it must have been like for those children. Taken from their homes, separated from their mothers and fathers, given different names and forced to learn a new language. It was the complete opposite of what she had been told about the "savages" who had inhabited the land prior to her family's arrival.

It sounded positively brutal, but she believed him. Even though she had just met the young man, Sarah did not feel that he was capable of lying to her.

"And what shall I call you?" she inquired, "I much prefer your other name. *Ka-nen*?"

"Den, you call dat." He beamed, more stunning than sunlight, deep dimples pitting his smooth brown cheeks. Sarah longed to touch his face, to see if his skin was as soft as it looked.

Sarah spent the rest of the afternoon with her new friend, talking and laughing as they lay on the carpet of lush spring greens at the creek's edge. There was no awkwardness between them and no barrier in communication, even with his broken English.

She stayed as long as she dared, then galloped home as fast as Sable's hooves could carry her. She hugged the horse tightly with her knees, then dropped the

reins and spread her arms wide, pretending they were wings. She felt light as a ball of dandelion fluff, drifting on the wind. She had a secret; one she could not share with anyone. Sarah had a secret new friend whom she planned to see again, very soon.

As spring gave way to summer and the sun's heat transformed the prairie from green to gold, every fair day saw Sarah mounting Sable to ride away across the plains. The other teenage girls glared at her over their daily chores, spiteful comments passing between them. None of the other girls were her friends; even her sisters barely spoke to her. Their jealousy that Sarah was free to do nothing but play every day overshadowed any pity they may have had for her illness and inevitable early death.

Sarah didn't care that she didn't have a close friend in any of the settlement girls. She didn't need them. She had Kanen. He was her best and only friend. He had become her entire world.

One day he became even more.

As the summer sun's intensity grew, swimming became a regular part of their ritual. Sarah wore nothing when she swam for fear of alerting her mother to the fact that she had been in the water. Swimming was a forbidden activity because Sarah's mother believed it was dangerous. Holding her breath underwater could trigger an involuntary coughing spell and cause her to drown. When it came to forbidden territory, Sarah was already well beyond the point of no return, so what was one more broken rule? She felt healthier than she had since she could remember. With regular exposure to the sunshine, Sarah's skin lost its sickly white hue and developed a healthy brown glow like Kanen's, though not as dark. She didn't feel shy around Kanen, who spent most of his time half-naked anyway.

It was just a matter of time before their relationship made the natural progression from friends to lovers. Sarah met Kanen at every opportunity, shedding her clothing as she skipped down the hillside to their secret meeting place beside the creek. He was always waiting, as if he knew exactly when she would arrive.

Every rendezvous was a ritual in passion. She splashed into the tepid pool, falling into his lean, muscled arms. The two devoured each other's bodies with insatiable hunger, each exploring every inch of the other. Swimming forgotten, they fell to the water's edge in a tangle of arms and legs, coupling with the urgent fervor of youth in love. For hours afterward they lay, fingers entwined, soaking up the sun's glorious rays with their unclad bodies. Time stood still for the lovers as they talked and basked in the glow of their union.

Sarah now had an even bigger secret, and it made her feel deliciously sinful.

* * *

It was late August. The hairy tips of nearly mature wheat stalks brushed Sable's belly as they shooshed through the golden sea at a leisurely jog. Sarah was as eager to meet her friend and lover as Sable was hers, but she held the mare at a slow pace to keep her from overheating in the stifling heat. They were later than usual and Kanen had probably been waiting for some time now. Sarah looked forward to a refreshing dip in the water even though the creek was almost dried up and their swimming hole was little more than a large mud puddle.

When they reached the base of the hill just before their secret meeting spot, Sable raised her head, pricking her ears toward a distant sound. Her trot slowed to a nervous, hesitant walk. Something wasn't right. Sarah listened. She detected the faint sounds of men shouting

and dogs barking. She jerked the mare to a stop and threw the reins over the bush before racing to the top of the hill.

Sarah's hand flew to her mouth. Eyes wide, she bit her lip to stifle the scream that threatened to escape.

She had been followed. She had suspected a few days earlier that someone was following her but had dismissed it as nothing more than imagination.

She recognized the group of men below. They were her uncles and cousins. Her older brother Seth was among them as well. The men were gathered around a carcass of some sort, letting their three large hunting dogs rip and tear at whatever it was. The men's shouts projected a mixture of rage and glee as they rained relentless blows upon their victim. Seth drew his knife from its sheath and swung it down in a forceful arc. Sarah glimpsed bronze skin, then an angry splash of red as the knife cleaved a piece of flesh from the lower body and tossed it to the nearest dog. She screamed and screamed at them to stop, but her lungs failed her. Nothing more than a wheezy whistle issued from her lips. Her voice was absent, no matter how hard she tried to scream. Seth's knife swept downward once more and his arm moved in a sawing motion.

Sarah found her voice, then lost her breath as her wail of agony turned into a spastic coughing fit.

Her brother stood, triumphant. His bellow of raucous laughter echoed across the plains. Seth raised his arm above his head in a proud display, holding his dripping, bloody prize by its long raven locks for all to see.

Sarah didn't remember mounting her horse, and the frantic gallop back to the settlement was but a blur in her memory.

* * *

The cruel prairie wind whistled and moaned around the lone horse and rider as they made their weary trek across the whitening plain. Sarah's rough, phlegmy cough had been steadily worsening. She knew her time was getting as short as the breaths she struggled to take. She would be fortunate if she survived long enough to give birth to the child that squirmed within her swollen belly. The mare was becoming heavier as well, from her encounter with the paint stallion. Sable would experience the joy of motherhood after the consumption robbed Sarah of hers.

Even though she had committed the most damnable of sins, Sarah hadn't believed her family would turn against her until it actually happened.

The insults stung like stones flung from the smug lips of the settlement girls, even her own sisters:

"Filthy, unclean whore!"

"Defiled by Satan!"

"Take your cursed spawn away from us!"

She was driven from the settlement into the frozen November wasteland, exiled to die alone on the plains. She was going to die soon anyway, they surmised, so they sent her away before she had a chance to give birth to the abomination she was carrying.

Sarah's exile was a blessing in disguise. Living the remainder of her days in the settlement would be a far greater hell than she would experience dying alone on the prairie, near the place where she had last seen her life's one true love.

She had only one destination in mind. One option.

She prayed and prayed to the Lord Almighty, begging Him for forgiveness for her sins. She prayed that they would have mercy on her; that they would see fit to accept his child after what had been done to him.

She spoke to him in her head as she had done so many times since his death.

“Kanen, give me strength. Please ask your elders to have mercy on me. I throw myself at their feet.”

She had followed the creek upstream from their meeting spot, the place where the horror of horrors had taken place, and found the faint trail leading away from the water toward the Indian reservation. Thin tendrils of smoke rose in the distance.

She had arrived.



Musings on Life Love and Loss

Juliette Kings

It has been a while. Now it seems we were both so young, our entire lives ahead of us.

You were sunshine personified. I was the moon.

Every day you made me laugh. You made me smile.

We built dreams of a life and of a love.

Then you were gone.

There would have been a lifetime to turn you into a creature of the night.

But you were sunshine.

Losing someone you love is like losing part of your heart and soul. The love is always there. The memories never go away. Then there are the doubts, the fears, the anger and sorrow. Then it just seems weird and I still can't get a handle on the death thing. I fear for those I love. I want to overprotect them but I let them fly while my heart almost stops.

But as you would have wished life goes on, new joy, new dreams, new desires - and the time we had was ours alone, frozen in that time forever.

But the world has changed. You would never believe it.

I was thinking of you and the ghost came and sat next to me on my back deck.

"I wish I knew where he was, you know, so I could let you know he is ok," said the phantom in the black suit.

"He's ok. I already know that much - in my heart and soul. At this point it doesn't matter exactly WHERE he is. We've both moved on. We moved on a long time ago, but I owe it to my friend not to forget."

"That's a good thing." The ghost looked up at the stars.

"Yes, it is."

* * *

In memory of my dear friend JEE 1956-1986



Your scent is on my ears
the color of your hair upon my hands
the flavor of your breath
remains on my tongue
like nectar to the hummingbird
Your fire ignites the water of
my blood, and every pore weeps
pleasure at the sight of you
striding towards me
to the cudgel of our power
you and I
Where we reside
cannot be entered
with such a burden
Fear is an anchor to the soul
Let it fly and be with timid ones
Cross the threshold
to answers seeking questions
And songs seeking words

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Don't Lose Your Head

Michael Haberfelner

I still remember the first time we met. It was at this curio shop down on Lexington. Do you even recall?

A curio shop, really! Normally no ten horses could have dragged me into one... but there I was, and I didn't even know what got me in there. I felt totally out of place between all those... crazy objects – most of which I could not even identify – all enshrouded in this odor of, no, this stench of must, of camphor, of mold, all mixed with the synthetic, sickening sweetness of rubbing alcohol and whatnot.

And then there you were; a lost soul in this weird pocket universe, just like myself.

There was such an aura of calmness, of serenity about you that immediately drew me to you, and from the moment our eyes met, I knew I would never let go of you again. Up until then, I didn't even think I was ready for another relationship yet, not after my husband had run away with this barmaid and effectively broken my heart – or so I thought, because the minute I saw you I felt it was still intact, beating for you, forever...

Our first few months together seem to have gone by in a jiffy, they don't seem to have been months even, just one dragged out moment of intense bliss! In fact, back then I couldn't tell one day from the other; they were all equally perfect. There weren't any peaks and lows during that time I could even recall, just one eternally extended highlight.

Sure, behind our back (and sometimes even to my face), our friends made certain remarks about you, about us, about our relationship... but they just didn't

understand, they never experienced the perfect love the way we did, they knew while we lived in bliss, they always had to go back home again to their mediocre partners (if they had any), and had to deal with the fact that unlike ours, their love was fading or had long ago died.

Of course, not even our bliss could last forever; that's just too much to ask for, but you know that had nothing to do with you – or with me for that matter.

It was my brother.

Sure, if your friends disapprove of your boyfriend it's one thing, they don't know any better – but you do expect different from a brother; blood's thicker than water after all. He's supposed to be there for me, no matter what. He's supposed to be happy for me, as I let him share in my happiness. Now it's still not so much the fact that he disapproved of you that got me so angry, but how he did it. Would he just have thrown you out, well, bad enough, but I could have dealt with it, would he have threatened to beat you up, worse, but there's something appealing, almost romantic even, in an over-caring brother at least.

But laughing at you? Calling me childish for loving you? Calling me flat-out insane? What kind of a response from a brother is that?

And what makes him so high and mighty anyway? I did tell you he is divorced, didn't I? And she was a cheating bitch, I knew it right from the beginning, couldn't believe his poor judgment in women. She left him though – after she cheated on him, mind you. He wanted her back even then – that poor fool.

Anyway, it broke his heart to see her go – and who was there to dry up every single one of his tears? Me, that's who! And now he even dares to laugh at my boyfriend? Questioning my judgment of people?

Well, we won't let him do that ever again, will we?

Mother was even worse. You must have gotten a totally wrong impression of her. She's normally a level-headed woman – which is why I was especially shocked about her positively hysterical reaction. She's not someone who's normally prone to screaming. In fact, I can't remember her raising her voice even once before that fateful day.

Now, big brother laughing at you, that was bad enough, but mom threatening you? Why was she so mad? She had never met you before. She hadn't even given you a chance to prove your worth, hadn't taken the time to try and get to know you. She started attacking you from the moment you went over the doorstep, attacked you verbally, then even physically. She even tried to beat me, what has gotten into that woman?

Now I might have been childish here but I have to admit, running away and vowing to never return was the only thing I saw fit to do. I still think it was the best idea under the circumstances.

But what's mom doing now? Why has she hired all those people to chase us? Why does she want to tear the two of us apart so desperately, and by force if necessary? If she doesn't like you, she could at least leave us in peace? We are not planning to do her any harm, why can't she do the same for us? She doesn't really think she can win back her daughter by organizing a posse, now can she? Where does she think she lives, in a bad soap opera?

I never wanted to run because I've never done anything wrong in all of my life, but if it means I have to run to be with you, so be it.

Oh my God, they've caught up with us.

Now we REALLY have to run. Come on, take my hand; maybe we can duck under there to shake them...

what? Gunshots? Isn't that excessive? This isn't a lynch mob after all. Guys, you are only chasing a girl wanting to elope with the man she loves, really and truly loves! Can't you just give us a rest? Haven't you got a heart, have you never loved?

Oh my God, don't fire that gun, you could hurt someone!

Have they hit you, darling? Let me look you over... nope, not a scratch. Good thing our pursuers are such bad shots.

Anyway, better let me shield you with my body, they wouldn't dare shoot m-...

But oh my God, why am I all wet? My whole shirt seems to be dripping with... I'm not sweating that much, am I? And why are my hands bloody if they haven't hit you? And what about that... stinging... pain? It seems my head has just been hit by a sledgehammer! And there, on my side... is that a... wound? Oh God! Ohgodohgodohgodohgod...

Let go, go on without me! You can't save me anymore, but at least save yourself!

Yeah... I knew you couldn't. Let's die together!

"I love you, darling, I love you..."

* * *

"So why again was this woman shot like a dog, Sheriff? She looks so... peaceful in death, so serene, as if she was one with the universe."

"Don't let first impressions fool you, doc! This woman is one of the most ruthless killers this county has ever seen. Slaughtered her brother in cold blood. Didn't even make an attempt to hide her guilt – in fact she left clues all over the place. Then she went into hiding until the news got out about her kill. Now you would assume she'd run, make it over the state border or something. But

no, remained right here in the city, boiler room of her own apartment building. Last place anyone would look, I'm ashamed to say. If we had, we could have prevented the worst. Because you know, she wasn't done yet. Once the news about the murder had reached her mother, that bitch paid Mommy a visit. Poor old woman screamed her head off, but her girl literally gutted her. Mommy's screams alerted the neighbors though, and when they came running, girly here ran off. Not fast enough. We picked up her trail within a few hours, and given the ghastliness of her crimes, it wasn't hard to organize a posse. In fact, I think everyone in the county legally carrying a gun took part. Shot like a dog? Yeah, she was shot like a dog, but that bitch deserved it. Just imagine – she killed her own brother and mother!”

“Any kind of motive for that?”

“That’s the funny thing: No, not at all. In fact, she was known to get along with her family exceptionally well. Never the hint of a problem. No warning lights or anything. True, people say she was hard hit when her husband ran off with that barmaid, and for a time she really withdrew from her friends and family after that. But of late, she seems to have bounced back a bit. Has been seen around again and stuff. Sure, people say her behavior was slightly... bizarre, but hey, a little bit of eccentricity doesn't make a murderer.”

“She doesn't look like much, actually, hardly a person even physically capable of slaughtering someone else. Any accomplices you know of?”

“That’s the other thing about this: No accomplices at all. Several eyewitnesses can confirm that much. In fact, after her husband ran off, she had garnered herself the reputation of being a loner. No close friends, no romance,

no dates, nobody she's been seen running around with, she really kept to herself."

"So what do you think caused all of this?"

"Beats me. Some of this looks carefully planned, other aspects sound like a sudden blood thirst. Drugs would be my best guess – but that's your department, doc, not mine. Oh, you want to know another bizarre aspect about this case? Her last words were 'I love you, darling, I love you.' – as if she were talking to somebody. But there simply wasn't anybody there."

"Weird. But that would at least explain the serene expression on her face. Hey, what's that, then?"

"Where have you got it from?"

"Pried it from her hand just now."

"Hunh, looks like a shrunken head. Like the ones they sell in curio shops. Come to think of it, there were some stories that she carried one of those around everywhere she went of late. Didn't make much of it, and I'm surprised actually that she held onto it until she breathed her last. Then again, she was said to have behaved slightly on the bizarre side lately."

"May I, ummm, keep it?"

"Why would you want to keep it?"

"Just a macabre hobby of mine. Collecting memorabilia from all the crime scenes I'm at. You'd be surprised how many coroners do it."

"Nothing that has to do with doctors surprises me. But sure, keep it!"

"You sure you don't need it as evidence?"

"Nope! This is pretty much an open-and-shut case. Nothing one shrunken head will change about this!"

* * *

I simply can't believe my luck! I can't believe I've met you here of all places!

Usually I hate being called to posse killings – they are the worst. You know, in regular murders, there is usually at least a hint of poetry; the way someone was murdered usually speaks to you, if in a macabre way. Not so with posse killings; these people are shot like dogs, without style, without panache, as if shooting people was just a sport for their pursuers – and I bet many of the posse-members see it exactly that way, nothing more than legalized killing of human prey to satisfy one's blood thirst.

This woman was of course no exception. Whatever she had done, she didn't deserve to die like this. I was already ready to throw up (yeah I know, I'm getting too old for this), and then I saw you! The most beautiful being in the universe!

Weird, nobody on the scene seemed to notice you much. Not even the sheriff paid any heed when I directed his attention to you. He was more than willing to let you go without further investigating. He actually and consciously sent you home with me. Is he blind? Or am I just amazingly lucky?

Anyhow, you are staying with me now! You have nowhere to go anyway, have you? I'll treat you well, I promise!

Yes, I do have a wife – and no, she won't understand what we are already having right now, not five minutes after we have met – but we can take care of the wife, can't we?...



Sensual Healing

Suzanne Parlee

On a bed of lavender
lay me down
among innocent kisses
feather like caresses
hesitant
like a first time lover
awash in mystery
searching
exploring
with sensuous touches
breathless and wanting
lift me higher
higher
still
to reach the cataclysmic end
of a new day



The Gift

Veronica Veil

It was Christmas, but as Christmas is wont to pass for many there was little cheer to be had. We were as two weary shipmates cast out on a deserted isle of lonely bitterness. It was the eighth Christmas we were to pass in our married life. The year leading up to that blessed day had not been particularly kind and we found ourselves alone, without friend or family, save each other. Yet despite the cruel fate that life had dealt us we struggled to maintain a sense of gratitude for the roof over our heads that blocked the harsh, cold winds that blew outside. And by the generosity of a sole benefactor we managed to make a sparse meal of clam linguine that included an all too infrequent dessert of Key Lime Pie to create the ambiance of a celebration. But there were no holiday decorations, no tree, no gifts, save the pleasure of each other's company, which is a largesse that too many others even found themselves without. We were thankful of that benison.

As the stress of life's mundane issues is apt to create, there had been little intimacy between us. Worry over the threat of losing our home and finding daily sustenance accompanied with the health issues my husband suffered had made it hard to find those necessary affections that are required of lovemaking. But I was determined to give my husband the gift of my expression of love. And so between repetitive viewings of "It's a Wonderful Life" and "Miracle on 34th Street" I whispered in his ear, "I want to make love to you."

The words caused a brief smile to grace his beleaguered countenance but it was only a fleeting

response. Spontaneity had become a distant memory, and the reluctance of fearing yet another failed attempt quickly replaced the wry grin.

But I was determined. I let the words sink into his mind and just added, “Let me know when you’re ready. I’m going to take a warm bubble bath.” I knew it would take a little time to let the required medication to take effect.

An hour later, freshly scrubbed and smelling of lavender, I took his hand and led him to the bedroom and shut the door. In the soft fading light, I slowly removed my flannel nightgown and let it drop to the floor. He removed his clothes and we got into bed. I kissed his face, embraced him and kissed his lips. I moved my hand over his aging body slowly and patiently waited for a response. He groaned as I reached for and stroked his thighs and groin. My tender administrations and the influence of the medications had begun to elicit a reaction. He grew firm in my hand and began to groan softly. I kissed his chest, nuzzled my face in the gray fur there and slowly moved down over his stomach kissing his body. I took him in my mouth. Lovingly and tenderly I sucked and nibbled. Not even concerning myself with my own orgasm, I was determined to give him the pleasure of release. He lay still, allowing me to work some magic. But after some twenty minutes, the culminations of my efforts were fading. He grew soft without coming.

I took a rest and while still holding him in my hand I laid my head on his shoulder. Defeated, he said, “Maybe we should try later,” and he started to sob. His health was not good, he’d recovered from the effects of the stroke some years before and the back surgery but that coupled with the natural decline of age had made it difficult to achieve the desired outcome. But I was not to be

discouraged. I held him while he sobbed. I told him to relax and not worry about the outcome, to just focus on being in the moment. I kissed him and for a while we just laid there holding each other.

I began to finger myself, thinking that, if nothing else, I would give him the pleasure of watching me bring myself to orgasm. Once my fingers were wet and infused with my own scent, I placed my fingers up to his nose to let him smell my natural flavors. It seemed to help him overcome his feelings of frustration. I put my breasts up to his face, hoping that such a nurturing gesture would bring him comfort. He sucked eagerly on my firm breast and I held him close to me, cradling his head in my arms. I moved my leg between his and began to stroke his penis with my inner thigh, gently moving myself in a rhythmic stride hoping to create a memory of desire. I was starting to get hot.

I moved up and straddled him and even though a strong erection was not present I placed myself directly over him and began to move back and forth. I attempted to put him inside me and rotated my hips and fingered the nub of my bulging clit. Still, there was little reward for my efforts. I slipped off of him and turned my ass toward his view. I continued to kiss him and the swirling of my tongue gave him audible pleasure. It began to have an effect and he began to move his hips rhythmically. After several minutes I felt his body stiffen and a moment later he longed for release accompanied by a loud and soulful groan. I tasted his fluids in my mouth and swallowed hungrily. I continued to softly kiss him allowing the sensations to linger as long as possible. When it became too sensitive I stopped and allowed him to catch a breath before rolling over. He pushed two fingers inside of me and pumped until I came in a full and spasmodic burst of

rippling, shuddering full-bodied orgasm. I laid there quietly panting and catching my breath as the feelings continued to wash over me. We lay in each other's arms. My whole body tingled and quivered. We fell asleep in each other's arms and enjoyed a long and restful night.

My memory of that night will stay with me and serve to remind me in the coming days of just how lucky we are despite our outer circumstances for we truly understand that the best gifts, at Christmas or any other time, are those we give of ourselves.



Song of My Soul

Rob Betz

Somewhere between the blinding light of fate's cruel truth and the shadows born of secrets that find purchase in every heart, lies the mist of love's compromise; thick with the promise of unfulfilled ideals but held aloft by the dream of what might still be possible.

In that unforgiving place between the light and shadows, we forged a passion that could sustain us both. Though I knew her love to be tempered and fickle, mine was unbridled and burned with a fury that could warm our nights until the last we shared; be that night this very one or twenty thousand from now.

My soul has never found such cause to sing; the unstruck melody spoken in her eyes and the symphony that dances around her smile drive me to madness in my desire for her. Her laughter embraces me and clouds all reason; what use have I for logic when such music comes?

For her part, she herself has forsaken much of what reason and common sense would dictate to her and loved me through all these years, in spite of myself and foolish deeds, seeing beyond instead to what lies in my heart. I, for my part, have endured the sword that is her cruelty at times.

In defiance of it all, we join hands in the mist, nearly twenty summers on, committed neither to light nor shadow, and our passion is again what it always has been; a love forged in the place unburdened by painful truths or dark secrets.

A love of compromise by virtue of reality's feathery touch. A love of purity by virtue of devotion's healing

embrace. A love for the rest of our days and nights by
virtue of compassion's sweet and tender kiss.



Jenny and Frankie Take a Trip

David W. Stone

“We don’t do this, we die. That simple. No choice.”

Jenny looked at Frankie to gauge his reaction. He was hesitant, but deep inside, he knew she was right. They did it, or they died. That simple. No choice. So, they would do it.

Jenny was not her name, really, not at that point. She did not speak in English. Her real name... at that point... and her language, were Russian, and pretty unpronounceable, as was Frankie’s. Their problem... and the problem for many people in Russia at that time... was their country’s leader. That person was Nicholay Alexandrovich Romanov, also known as Tsar Nicholas II, Emperor and Autocrat of All the Russias, Grand Duke of Finland, King of Poland... and he was not a big fan of persons of Jewish origins.

Jenny Mary Schapiro and her husband (and cousin) Frank Schapiro were of decidedly Jewish origin. They had also been told that staying in Russia might possibly be hazardous to their health, as well as the health of their unborn child. Hence, the decision to depart Russia for greener, and safer, pastures. The decision was not made alone. It was determined that Jenny, Frankie, Jenny’s sister Rose and some of Frankie’s’ siblings would leave together. Preparations were made, and finally the day arrived.

Now, they couldn’t just stroll down to the airport, hop a plane and leave... after all, this was 1911, and there weren’t a whole lot of airports in rural Russia. They could leave... the Tsar wasn’t into killing Jews; he just didn’t want them around. If they wanted to leave his country,

why, that was fine with him. It was the ones that decided to stay that he had a problem with. Since Jenny, Frankie and company decided to leave, they were OK... and so, the papers for their departure were processed, and they were free to go.

As I mentioned, hopping a plane seemed to be out of the question, so they took a couple of wagons instead. No furniture was taken; only the bare necessities needed for survival. The travel was slow... a wagon pulled by a couple of horses doesn't exactly zip down the road. This was actually a good thing, because Jenny was in a rather advanced state of pregnancy, and being jolted around in a speeding wagon might not have been best for her health. After all, health care in Russia in 1911 wasn't exactly at the forefront of technology. Since they weren't breaking any speeding laws, it took a while... traveling across Western Russia, past sleepy villages and through magnificent forests. Finally, they crossed the border into Latvia... and kept going. Across Latvia they traveled, until they finally came to the city of Riva. Here, they sold the wagons and horses, and booked passage on a ship bound for Great Britain. By this time, summer was waning, autumn was waxing, and Jenny was growing... especially in the abdominal area.

So... they made it to Great Britain... where do they go from here? Jenny was determined... her child would be born in America; land of the free, etc., etc. Rose indicated that she would go with Jenny. Frankie and all of his siblings decided that the best place to go would be South Africa. Back and forth they went, each holding out for his or her decision. Finally, Jenny set her foot firmly down. If Frankie wanted to go to South Africa, that was fine. She was going to America... where she would raise her child in her own way. And... she was leaving

immediately; it was important to her that this child be born in America... be an American citizen from birth.

She booked passage on a ship to New York for herself and her sister, and then her husband decided that maybe he'd better go to America. His siblings all opted to go to South Africa. The big day came, they said their goodbyes, and Jenny, Frankie and Rose boarded their ship. The ship set sail, and they were on their way. We are now, by the way, just getting on to the month of October; co-incidentally, the same month that Jenny is due to give birth.

The first part of the voyage was uneventful... the last part wasn't. They were still a couple of days out of New York when Jenny went into labor. This was not to be considered a good thing. She did not want her child to be totally countryless... a child of the Atlantic Ocean. She wanted him to be an American... and an American he would be... even if she had to cross her legs very tightly till they landed. The ship's doctor came down, examined her, and informed her that it was a false labor; she wasn't ready yet to be giving birth. But she'd better get into the country and into a hospital pretty fast, 'cause it wouldn't be long.

Well, the big day arrived... looking over the rail, everyone could see, there in the distance, the Statue of Liberty. Tall and majestic it stood in the distance, beckoning to all on the ship. Shortly thereafter, the ship docked, and Ellis Island gained a bunch of people for processing into the United States. During the processing, they were given the opportunity to give whatever names they wanted. Since they knew how Russia felt about Jews, but they didn't know how America felt about them, they decided to change their names. Thus, they officially became Jenny and Frank Stone, and Rose became Rose

Stone, leaving their names and their history in the past. They were starting over. Once that was done, they were released into the city of New York. The first thing they did was find a hospital for Jenny. While she was there, Frankie went looking for a place to live. They were, at that point in the Borough of Brooklyn, City of New York, Country, U.S.A.

Well, while Frankie was looking for a place to live, Jenny was doing her part to keep busy. She was in heavy labor. This progressed for a while, and then, on October 8, 1911, she delivered a baby boy... subsequently named Isodore William Stone. One wonders, at this point, about changing a Jewish name to a non-Jewish one... then naming their child with a Jewish name.

Anyway... Frankie found an apartment... Jenny furnished it with a baby. Frankie found a job... Jenny bought furniture and groceries. Life went on... for a short time. Frankie was getting restless; he really wanted to be in South Africa with his brothers and sisters. And so, one bright spring day, he announced that he was leaving – going to Africa to be with his family. Nothing Jenny or Rose said had any effect, and one day he was gone... out of their lives and out of this story.

Life continued to go on... hard, poverty stricken, but reasonably good. Isodore hated his name and stopped using it, opting for his middle name. He became William Stone, and that's how he stayed. The sisters managed to put him through school; get him into college; get him into medical school. He ended up as a doctor; and when he moved to Utah, he took his mother and his aunt with him. He joined the Army, rising to the rank of Major; married, had two sons, divorced, re-married. Life was good.

Two sons... second generations Americans, the continuation of the new family name. Jenny and Rose aged in peace and tranquility. Jenny lived to see her grandchildren into their teens, and finally died in 1963 in a very nice nursing home in Salt Lake City. Her family was secure... a successful son, two grandsons to carry on the family name, peace and tranquility. She did not know that one of her grandsons would follow her into death three years later, that the other would have a falling out with her son, and would subsequently go off to a war. She did not know that her son would live for another 36 years, and pass away in another state, with only his wife and stepdaughter by his side. Oh... and that other grandson? The one who survived to go to war? Well, he's still around. He's in his sixties now, has eight children... and fifteen grandchildren... the third and fourth generations of Stones in this country. And some of his grandchildren are now of an age to have children of their own... a fifth generation. For him, life is also good. So... what is he doing now? Well, at this very moment he is sitting at his desk, writing a story about how Once Upon a Time, 101 years ago, his Grandma Jenny and Grandpa Frankie took a trip...



The Travelers

Marla Todd

The night was falling on the travelers, Daniel, his son Tad and daughter Ada. They had to stop before the nightfall and freezing snowfalls. They were finally going home from the dreams of gold to the city where Daniel had found a job in his profession of typesetter and reporter. When his wife had passed on he followed his dream to the California gold fields taking his teenage children with him.

They came upon a cabin, the door boarded up from the outside, the windows shuttered. It looked deserted and like shelter for the night. Dan and his son pried the nails off of the boards, which secured the door and went into the two-room structure. Inside was a cozy room with a fireplace, comfortable chairs and a wall full of books. Dan sent Tad out to bring in firewood.

Ada went to the bedroom and called her father. On the bed was a man, still as the night, cold and pale as the snow. In his arms, wrapped in a blanket was a tiny girl in a red velvet hat, a scarf covering most of her small face. She was also still and pale.

Ada's heart sank. The poor souls in the bed looked to have passed on. But why were they trapped in the cabin? Had they been sick? Why were they not buried with a prayer and the proper respect? The man's coat was obviously expensive and of the finest materials. His boots were of the most beautiful leather and style. His face was handsome and refined. Ada took off her glove and touched the back of her hand to the man's face. He was indeed cold as ice and still as death. She called in her father.

"I know this man," he said. "A fine man. A poet. I heard him read when I was in San Francisco. What a tragic pity to find him here with his child."

The looked upon the bodies of the father and child when they saw the slightest movement and the man opened his eyes.

"My daughter, please help her," whispered the man on the bed.

Ada took the girl in her arms. She weighed almost nothing. The child let out a sigh. Ada brought the girl into the other room and sat in a rocking chair by the fire Tad had built. The girl started to move and put her face against Ada's warm neck. Ada soon fell asleep with dreams of flowers and all things good.

Her dreams soon turned into passionate kisses in the strong arms of the handsome stranger. She never imagined such desire existed within her soul. And when he stopped, she was filled with a contentment she'd never known.

In the morning the poet and child were gone.

The travelers found box covered with red paper. In the box was a golden heart and a note to Ada.

Dearest Ada,

This heart belonged to my dear wife, who was murdered by villains of the vilest kind. Please wear it knowing that you will always be loved and you will always be a part of us.

TK

On the table in the front room was a bounty of food. Where had it come from? There were fresh baked goods, milk and juice, exotic fruits, sausages and chocolates. Under small quilted cozies were pots with fragrant tea and coffee.

Daniel read the note aloud to his children.

My heart thanks you for your generosity.

You saved our lives.

You never questioned who had trapped us or hurt us.

You never judged us.

You never feared us.

The love between a parent and his children is burned into your heart like the fires that burn in the heavenly stars.

My daughter and I will never forget you.

Your children and their children and their children will always be safe and watched over and kept from the harm of wicked men. I owe and promise you that.

Never fear the night or the darkness for we will always be watching your back.

~ Thomas Kent

As the travelers ate they compared notes about sweet dreams that night along with stiff necks. They spoke of Mr. Kent and his precious daughter and wondered why they'd been trapped in the cabin.

Many many years later after a long and wonderful life full of romance and adventure, Ada fingered the heart, which she still wore. As she took her last breath she said, "I have never known fear, only love".

An ocean away Thomas Kent felt an icy wind on his face, then hope and gratitude in his cold Vampire heart.



You twist through my heart
Like a bolt through a nut
I am a nut
Think twice before you bolt



Heart-Shaped Box

Mandy White

Megan wept, curled on her side in the tightest ball she could manage. She had been curled up in the fetal position on her bed for hours – days, actually, doing nothing but cry. Barely moving except to use the bathroom and drink a bit of water. She couldn't eat, she couldn't sleep and the ache in her chest wouldn't go away no matter how many painkillers she took.

So this is what a broken heart feels like.

She now understood why they called it heartbreak. What she felt was beyond sadness; it manifested as a tangible physical pain in her chest that radiated down into her belly. It was the most horrible sensation ever, and it was all *HIS* fault. How could he have been so cruel to her when all she had done was love him?

She didn't know where she had gone wrong. She had given him everything; waited on him hand and foot and catered to his every wish but in the end it wasn't enough. He took her heart and tore it to shreds and then walked out the door as if the last two years had meant nothing.

She wanted to die.

If I died, you'd be sorry! You'd have to live with it for the rest of your life, knowing that YOU were the one who drove me to suicide!

Died of a broken heart.

That would show him how much she loved him.

Nobody else will ever love you the way I do! You'll see! One day you will come crawling back to me with your heart in shreds, then you'll know how you made me feel. And then I can kiss you better. We can heal together.

No, she would not end her life. Life was worth living as long as there was a chance of winning him back.

She would get him back.

Or die trying.

Richard had tried to leave her a few times during the last year but each time she had managed to convince him to stay. She begged and pleaded and promised to be everything he wanted in a woman but he became cold and aloof nonetheless. He didn't want intimacy anymore. He participated in sex when she was persistent enough to make his physical urges overcome his mental reluctance but his lack of desire was obvious.

She was willing to accept his lack of enthusiasm in their relationship as long as he didn't leave. They could work things out. She would make it better. She just had to make him see how much she loved him and he would know they were destined to be together.

It was the pregnancy that did it.

The one thing that should have cemented them together forever turned out to be the catalyst that ended their relationship. He was willing to stay for the sake of the baby. He even agreed to marry her after much pleading and cajoling on her part.

It would be the perfect wedding. She had already chosen her dress – a high-waisted design that would look stunning even with the bulge in her belly. She booked the church and hired the caterer and sent out invitations. It would be the beautiful fairytale wedding she had always dreamed of. Afterward, he would take her in his arms and carry her over the threshold and make love to her, tenderly and passionately the way a husband should. Their life together would be picture-perfect.

There was just one small detail.

She wasn't pregnant.

Megan had thought she was pregnant, without a doubt. Even though the pregnancy tests (three of them, to be exact) were negative, she figured that it was just too early. She experienced all the symptoms – the missed period, tender breasts, bloated belly and irritability. She even felt sick in the mornings. When her period arrived late, it was easy to hide it from him since he showed no interest in her physically. Since their engagement Richard had become even more distant, never meeting her eyes and only speaking to her when it was absolutely necessary.

The pregnancy was a false alarm – just a bad case of PMS – but it didn't matter. She would be pregnant by the time they got married; she would make sure of it.

She managed to convince him to have sex once during the following month but it did not result in pregnancy. Panicked, she redoubled her efforts to seduce him but it seemed like the harder she tried the less receptive he became. Eventually he couldn't even sustain an erection long enough to finish.

Four months passed. Then five and still she wasn't pregnant. She faked the symptoms, pretending to get sick in the mornings and eating like a horse so she would gain some girth and appear pregnant. The wedding was just six

weeks away and she only needed to keep up her charade until after the minister declared them to be husband and wife. After that, she could fake a miscarriage and he would be there to comfort her and they could try again to start a family. She began to wear padding under her clothing to keep up appearances so she would have the appropriate look under her wedding dress.

She didn't hear him come into the house that day. He had been moving around the house like a ghost lately with a faraway look in his eyes, never speaking unless spoken to. On that particular day, he came home from work early and she wasn't expecting him. She was in the bedroom, in front of the mirror; trying on the next size of pillow she was going to bind to her belly to make it look thicker.

She had no idea how long he was standing there, watching her in silence.

He said nothing.

He refused to speak to her, no matter how she cried and pleaded. He started packing immediately and left that night, taking only the bare necessities and leaving everything else behind. She clung to his leg, begging him to stay but he peeled her off of him in disgust. He walked out of her life without giving a second thought to their future together, leaving her blubbering on the floor in a pool of tears.

Megan was not only heartbroken; she was humiliated. He told his family and all of their friends about her deceit and his reason for leaving. Nobody would speak to her.

She was alone.

* * *

A year later, Megan still sobbed herself to sleep but not as often. The pain in her chest had diminished to a

dull ache but it never went away altogether. They said time heals all wounds but she knew that in her case it wouldn't. She still loved Richard heart and soul and would never stop. They were meant to be together. He was hers and no amount of time or distance would ever change that.

She wasted her Saturday afternoons wandering aimlessly through the mall, gazing at the gowns in the bridal shop, the sexy lingerie in Victoria's Secret and the endless displays of adorable children's clothing. From infant to toddler to preschooler... there were too many cute outfits to choose from. She should have been buying clothing for her own child – for their child. Instead, she could only look, and dream.

She wandered toward the food court to feed her craving for sweets. She had been living on junk food lately and had gained a considerable amount of weight. It didn't matter, because she had nobody to stay thin for. At that moment, Cinnabon was calling her.

A baby stroller blocked her path as she navigated through the tables to get to the food counters. She edged around it, pausing for a moment to admire the infant, a little girl about three months old, dressed in an adorable pink outfit. The parents, deeply engrossed in conversation, giggled and shared an intimate kiss.

Megan froze.

No.

It couldn't be!

It was him. Richard.

Her Richard.

Judging from the age of the infant in the stroller, he hadn't wasted any time after leaving her. He might have already been seeing that woman behind her back! That

would explain his lack of interest in Megan. The slut had already tired him out before he got home.

Rage boiled over inside her when she saw that the bitch wore an engagement ring – a large, stunning diamond solitaire. Much more spectacular than the shitty little band he had grudgingly given her.

“YOU BASTARD!” Megan roared, sweeping the food and beverages off the table onto the couple’s laps.

“YOU DIRTY CHEATING MOTHERFUCKER!”

“Richard?” the woman said, her voice shaking as she protectively pulled the baby stroller closer to her.

“You stay out of it, slut! I’m talking to my husband. You’ve done enough already!”

Richard finally spoke up. “Get the hell away from my family, you crazy bitch.”

“YOUR family? *YOUR* family?” Megan sputtered. “What about *OUR* family? The one you couldn’t even give me because your dick was always limp!”

“I never wanted you, Megan. I never loved you. You were a mistake. The biggest mistake I ever made.” Richard’s tone was calm, emotionless. How could he not feel anything after sharing his life with her for two years?

Richard’s bitch had taken her child and moved away from the table. She was talking to the clerk at Cinnabon and a security guard was already making his way toward them.

“You think you’ll be happy with her?” Megan yelled. “She’s nothing! You and *ME! WE* were meant to be together! Nobody will love you the way I do. *NOBODY!*”

The security guard stepped between them.

“I’ll have to ask you to move away, ma’am. Leave these people alone.”

“Fuck you!” she spat, leaning around the uniformed man to make eye contact with Richard once more.

“You can’t escape fate, Richard. You’re mine! One day you’ll come crawling back. You love me. I know you do.”

Two more security guards came from behind and took her arms, leading her away from the food court. They demanded that she leave at once or the police would be called.

Megan left. She had said her piece.

Richard knew the truth.

She would make him see the truth.

* * *

Megan had newfound energy. It was as if her outburst with Richard had broken her free from the shackles of depression and given her a new purpose in life. Richard was her purpose and she fixated on him like never before.

She had seen what their life would look like. She just needed to take the place of the baby-making whore in the food court and everything would be perfect again.

She would win him back. His heart had always been hers; he just didn’t realize it yet.

Having been banned from the local mall, Megan’s Saturday shopping trip took her to the streets and a new neighborhood where she had never been before.

Her Obsessive Compulsive Disorder often prevented her from visiting new places because OCD made it difficult to deviate from an established routine. Occasionally, change was forced and this time she found it refreshing instead of disturbing. Her therapist, whom she hadn’t seen in more than five years, would have called it ‘a positive step’.

The buildings were old; many of them made from weathered red bricks. It was a nice change of pace from the icy-smooth gray concrete of downtown. The new neighborhood featured a wealth of second-hand stores, a few hippie shops selling bongos and other paraphernalia and some dusty-looking used bookstores. It was in one of these bookstores that she found it.

The tattered brown binding of the book caught her eye for some reason and immediately she reached for it.

The Joy of Spellcasting.

She chuckled to herself. *Kind of cheesy*, she thought.

It sounded like a cookbook. *Why not?* It could be fun. Megan purchased the book and placed it in her bag. Her step had a new spring to it on the way home.

She opened the book to the table of contents and quickly found what she was looking for.

Love Spells – page 131.

Something was handwritten at the bottom of the yellowed page. The ink had blurred over time but it was still legible. Megan held it up to the light to make out the words.

Be warned, ye who goest here. Think ye long on what thou desirest. The spells contained within be those most powerful. What thou desirest, thou shalt receive.

Megan smirked. It sounded like something out of a low-budget after-school Halloween special.

Good to know. Let's see if it's true.

She turned to page 131 and began to read.

There were several love spells and potions but most of them looked complicated. They contained ingredients she had never heard of and took too long to yield results. They ranged anywhere from six months to three years to complete a spell. Megan wanted immediate results.

She settled on the *One Moon Love Charm*. It claimed to return a lost love in one month and she had all the ingredients to make it work:

A container made from wood or metal.

A likeness of your lost love. OR

An object belonging to your lost love, OR

A sample of your loved one's blood or flesh.

Write on a piece of parchment exactly what you desire.

Seal with your own blood or flesh to bond with your lover's flesh for all eternity.

Bury the container three feet deep in dark soil under the light of the full moon.

Stand over the burial site and turn around three times and then say the incantation every night for one month. When the moon reaches its next fullness, the object of your desire will come to you.

Megan selected a heart-shaped wooden jewelry box Richard had given her when they first started dating – back when he still knew he loved her. The box held no jewelry except for the engagement ring that no longer fit her finger. She had been using it to store her favorite photos of Richard, all carefully cropped with a pair of scissors to a heart shape.

A likeness of your lost love.

What better likeness than an actual photo? She left all of the photos in the box.

OR an object belonging to your lost love.

That was easy, since Richard had left most of his belongings behind when he left, so why not add that as well? She selected a watch she had bought him for Christmas that he always seemed to forget to wear and his razor, which he had left in the bathroom.

OR a sample of your loved one's blood or flesh.

Technically, the razor already had that covered, since it contained beard stubble and no doubt skin cells as

well. She wanted to add as much punch to the spell as possible. More would be better, right? She cleaned the bathtub drain, finding a slimy hairball made up of both his hair and hers. That covered both samples of their flesh.

On a plain white piece of paper, she wrote the words she had chosen:

Richard Cole, I desire your heart and nothing else.

She folded it neatly and placed it in the box.

She sliced her index finger with a razor blade and let the blood flow freely over the contents of the jewelry box.

Under the full moon she stood, on the fresh mound of dirt beneath which the box was buried. She turned around three times and then recited the incantation, which she had memorized:

“By the Earth below and the moon above,

You will be my one true love.

Bound in blood and sealed in Earth,

Waiting for our love’s new birth.

Empowered by the Law of Three,

Richard’s heart will come to me.

Three times Three.

So mote it be.”

She repeated the incantation two more times just for good measure. If the Law of Three was a real thing, then it made sense to do everything three times to amplify the power threefold.

The following night she repeated the ritual, chanting the incantation three times. After a pause, she recited it three times more.

She couldn’t stop the pattern once it had begun. Richard had hated her OCD but it was one of the things that made her organized and precise in everything she did. Every night she added three more repetitions to the

incantation. When she reached the 29th night she recited it a total of 87 times. When she went to bed at night, the rhyme played over and over inside her head until she fell asleep.

The moon had reached the first day of its three days of fullness. It would be at its fullest the following night. Megan snuggled happily into her bed, confident that Richard would be with her soon.

* * *

“Jenkins! Get in here! You gotta see this!” Ralph Anderson shouted to his assistant.

Jenkins wandered through the double doors of the morgue, stuffing the remains of a tuna sandwich into his mouth.

“I’m still on break. Couldn’t you have waited another ten minutes?”

“No, I need you to see this. You gotta tell me I’m not crazy.”

Jenkins approached the table where his superior was conducting a routine autopsy. The ribcage was splayed open, revealing the inside of the stiff’s chest.

“So what’s the deal? You find an alien in there? Looks pretty normal to me.”

“Look again. Tell me what you see. More specifically, what’s missing?”

Jenkins leaned over the corpse to take a closer look, licking mayonnaise off of his fingertips.

“Yeah, so it looks like you’ve already removed the heart, and—”

“But I haven’t,” Anderson said, almost in a whisper.

“Sure you have. It’s not in there.” Jenkins looked around at the empty stainless steel trays that surrounded the autopsy table. “So, where’d ya put it?”

“I’m telling you, it wasn’t in there when we got him.”

“So, what is this then, a serial killer case?”

“No. Probable heart attack. Sudden death, cause unknown.”

“So, where’s the heart?”

“That is the question, isn’t it? There was no incision in the body, no sign of hemorrhage inside. It’s just... missing.”

“We gonna record this?”

“Who’s gonna believe us? I’m closing him back up and labelling him a coronary.”

* * *

Megan woke the morning of the thirtieth day, feeling well rested and energized. Today, Richard would return. She would take a nice long bath and put on something pretty and fix him a nice dinner. It would be the perfect day – one for which she had worked very diligently.

She stretched and yawned, rolling over to caress the pillow where Richard would lay his head that night.

Her hand touched something wet.

Something rounded, about the size of her fist.

It was warm, and pulsed with a steady, rhythmic beat.



Let me Kiss You

Anand Matthew

~for Caroline~

Feasting my soul
My exquisite, timeless and delectable maiden
You are my celebration of life!
Waiting for thee, I see the rags of time
Dance with the rhythm of my heart
I see you, feel you
My love, my dove
For, the entire cosmos rests in thy sight and thought
Let me see your eyes
For, I see the constellation of stars celebrating our love
I see the endless story of our love in thy sparkling eyes
My love, beautiful
I love you with an everlasting love of my love
Your lips are like crimson thread
Marvel masterpiece of the Brahma
My love, you are the crown of all his creations
Of beauty and love
Let me kiss you with the kisses of mine



The Summer Soldier

Marie Frankson

I stood in front of a small crowd, wearing a pair of khaki pants and a blue polo shirt, nervous and trying to not show it. This was the make it or break it point for me; TV executives from the History Channel and the small camera crew they provided and a few people who were in the general vicinity and wanted to see what was going on all had their eyes on me. I was fresh out of college with a Master's Degree in American history under my belt, my undergraduate degree being in social studies education, and thanks to the help of a friend and fellow history major, I was somehow able to land a pilot episode for a TV show on the History Channel. That's why we were here, that's why I was double-checking and making calls on my cell phone to make sure the people I were using as sources were here or on their way, as well as being connected to wireless microphones. If this pilot tested well then I would have a career as a historian for the History Channel.

"Sarah, are you ready?" the director shouted.

"As ready as I'll ever be," I shouted back, praying that I wouldn't forget my lines after spending all the time doing my own research and writing my own script.

"Okay. Take one in five, four, three, two, go!"

"Hi, I'm Sarah Anderson and I'm the American Historian. I'm here at the historic Saratoga National Battlefield Park in modern-day Schuylerville, New York. This is where the most piv—"

"Heads up!" a voice shouted, and I saw an apple flying in the air and coming towards me. Unable to duck

out of the way in time, the apple smacked me in the head and I fell.

“Ow,” I said as I sat up, awakening after apparently having been knocked out, “where is everyone?” Except for the sounds of gunfire in the distance, it was hunting season here in the Adirondacks after all, everything looked the same. Is this how the History Channel treats their historians if they get injured on the job? I felt my back for the wireless mic pack... gone. At least they took the mic off me before just leaving my unconscious body where it lay.

Still, this doesn't feel right.

I heard hoof beats behind me and a booming male voice shouted, “who goes there?”

I shielded my eyes from the setting September sun and saw a man dressed in a blue military uniform indicative of the 18th century riding a white stallion. He had brown shoulder-length hair that was tied back with a black ribbon and wore a gold-trimmed tri-corner hat. His riding boots were black and shiny and he had an air of arrogance about him.

If he's a re-enactor, I thought, he's here rather late. The battle re-enactment ended last week.

“My name is Sarah,” I said clambering to my feet, “and I think I’m lost.”

“Patriot or Loyalist?”

“Excuse me?”

“Are you a Patriot or a Loyalist?”

“Um, I am a Patriot.” I claimed to be a Patriot, although I had family come over from England in the 18th century strictly to fight for the English during the American Revolution and returned home after Cornwallis had surrendered to Washington at the Battle of Yorktown.

The man held out his hand. "Climb on. I will take you to my superior officer who will deal with you."

"What is your name, kind sir?" I asked after having climbed on the back of his horse and placing my arms around his waist so I could hold on and not risk falling off the horse as we rode.

"My name is General Benedict—"

"Benedict Arnold?"

"I see my reputation precedes me."

"You are a military genius."

"My superiors do not think so."

"I am sure you will show them differently," I assured him, "General, if you would be so kind, where am I?"

"You are in Saratoga. Luckily you were found on the American side; who knows what the British would have done to you if they had found you," he paused, "that is a strange ensemble you are wearing."

"I am not from around here; this is common dress for men and women alike where I am from."

"You need something more suited to you; a lady should never wear britches."

I thought of saying a witty retort like 'I never claimed to be a lady' but thought otherwise. After all, I had my arms around the waist of the handsome Benedict freaking Arnold and was riding on the back of his stallion.

"Whoa!" Benedict shouted as he tugged on the reigns of his horse.

"Whoa!" I exclaimed as he helped me off of his horse and I saw thousands of white tents before me. This was the American encampment at Saratoga and I was actually here, this wasn't a re-enactment.

We walked towards a tent that stood out from the rest. There were flags around it and it was adorned with

gold trim. My heart was pounding out of my chest and I felt lightheaded. What was my fate going to be?

“General Gates, I need to talk to you,” Benedict said, “I have a young lady with me.”

“Come in,” a gruff voice responded.

“General, this is Sarah. I found her on the redoubt.”

I curtsied as best as I could while wearing pants and the General bowed.

“What is your full name, young lady?”

“My name is Sarah Anderson, sir,” I replied nervously.

“Where are you from?”

“I live in Albany, sir,” my heart was still pounding as he interrogated me.

“How did you get here?”

“I do not know.”

“You do not appear to be lying. You seem truthful, nervous but truthful.”

“I am an honest person, sir.”

“Allow me to ask this one improper question: how old are you?”

“I am twenty-four years old.”

“You do not look it.”

“I have been told that before,” I said with a smile.

“Are you married or engaged to be married?”

“No sir.”...

“General, the sun is setting over the Balcarres Redoubt,” Benedict said, “perhaps something should be done about Miss Anderson.”

“Of course. Have one of your men give up his tent for the night, she will sleep there,” he replied.

“General,” I began, “I know the war has no comforts, but I believe the fighting man should have a

roof over his head. I refuse to take the tent away from the fighting man, from the man who is fighting so that one day we may all be free of tyranny. If a blanket will be provided for me, I will sleep outside under the stars. I used to do that with my brothers when we were very young on hot summer nights when the sky was clear. I do not mind forfeiting my own comfort.”

“Very well, if that is what you wish.”

“It is.” When I spoke, I noticed the corners of Benedict’s mouth turn upwards.

“Did you really used to lay out under the stars and sleep with your brothers outside on hot summer nights?” asked Benedict when we had left the General’s quarters, his arms full with a goose down blanket.

“Of course, I have no reason to lie to you, General,” I replied, biting my bottom lip.

“If you do not think it improper, Sarah, you may share a tent with me. I promise to not make any unwanted advance towards you.”

“I know you are a gentleman, sir, and I do accept your offer,” I said with a smile.

He smiled back, nodded, and pointed to a tent similarly decorated to the General’s tent. “That one is mine,” and he continued to lead the way.

Days passed; Ben, as I had come to call him, spent his days at the Freedman Farmhouse coming up with strategies to win the battles here on this battlefield. Burgoyne and his men were moving towards the Balcarres Redoubt, which I already knew would be where they met their demise. I spent my days telling the men, some whose morale was exceptionally low, what they were fighting for... land, freedom for tyranny, and self-rule; albeit large populations of people would gain virtually few rights and freedoms, but they didn’t need to know what I know.

Ben and I would spend our nights together. We would often lay together, his head in my lap, as we talked about the war. It was hard for me because, essentially, I was lying the whole time. The information was all true, but nearly everything about me that I told him was a lie. I knew how this would end; he would become the most infamous traitor in American history and I would go back to my own time. But... what if there was a way I could tell him not to do it? Prevent him from meeting the young woman he would come to love who would manipulate him to tell John Andre to give up the plans to West Point. Would it even work? Could I change history and prevent Ben from being the world's most infamous traitor?

"Ben?" I asked one night while we lay together, side by side.

"Yes Sarah?"

"What do you think of the American cause?" I asked propping myself up on one arm so I could look at him.

"I think it's a good cause. If I did not think that it was a good cause, then I would not still be involved."

"What about the British cause?"

"I can understand where they are coming from. This land was claimed by them, but they are the absentee parent; they are not present except when they are needed to defend their land from someone else who wants it. They take what they think is theirs to take. This land was founded to benefit them, and we were the ones who messed things up. The land and its people are too diverse for them to control rightly. There needs to be a new government; if they would change, if they would be a little more forgiving in their taxation policies, then maybe this war would not have come to be."

I nodded, "Mhmm."

He put an arm around my shoulders and adjusted his body so he was cradling me and I put my head on his chest, "I know what you have been doing for the men."

"You do?" I said, more as a question than as a reply.

"It is good, what you are doing. It heightens their morale and makes them want to keep fighting for what they believe in. The war has been long and hard, they need to be reminded why they are here doing what they are doing. You are a good woman, Sarah," he tilted my head up and placed his lips on mine.

I pulled back, a little confused. "What was that?"

"You did not want me to kiss you?"

"You could have given me a little warning first," I said with a smile.

"Can I kiss you again?"

I smiled, "Yes."

Ben placed his lips on mine once again and it was amazing. His lips were soft and full and moved on mine with skill. It was the perfect kiss every woman dreams of, the kiss we fantasize about while watching romance movies. I felt his hand on my lower back as he pulled me close to him and soon he was on top of me.

"Ben, I'm not that kind of woman," I said as I pulled away from his kiss.

"I know," he said, "just kiss me, we will not go further than that tonight."

I awoke in a cold sweat; something had startled me but when I looked around in the dark, all I could see was Ben asleep beside me and hear him snoring softly.

"General," someone said from outside the tent.

"Hmm, yes?" Ben said, being startled awake himself.

"The British are moving in to attack."

Ben jumped out of bed and put on his breeches, removed his bed clothes and put on another shirt, and pulled on his riding boots. All this happened so quickly it was a blur.

“Ready the troops,” Ben said to the man outside, and then kissed me.

“Ben, I want to help,” I said.

“Sarah, it is too dangerous.”

“But Ben, I want to be with you. I don’t care how dangerous it is. Please, let me help the Patriots.”

“I care too much about you to let you fight with us, Sarah, but you can watch from the hill overlooking the field if you would like to.”

“Ben,” before I could stop them, the words were coming out of my mouth, “I love you.” That was it, the words a woman isn’t supposed to say to a man first, especially not in this era because it wasn’t proper.

Ben took a step forward, placed a hand on my cheek, looked me in the eyes, and said, “I love you too Sarah” then kissed me once more.

“Go,” I said, “I’ll watch over you on the battlefield.”

It was cold that October morning, and as the sun rose into the sky, I could see the Redcoats advancing. They, led by General John Burgoyne, were on Barber’s wheat field on a rise above Mill Brook and had stopped to observe the Patriot position. I heard some shouting on the field and saw Ben riding off on his stallion, he apparently had gotten into a heated argument with his superior and now General Gates was commanding the American left flank and General Lincoln had command of the right.

From my studies of American history, I already knew what was happening without even looking at the

field: when American scouts brought news of Burgoyne's movement to Gates, he would order Colonel Daniel Morgan's Kentucky Riflemen out to the far left, with General Poor's men (the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd New Hampshire Regiments on the left; the 2nd and 4th New York Regiments on the right), and General Learned's (1st New York, 1st Canadian, 2nd, 8th and 9th Massachusetts Regiments, plus militia companies) in the center. A force of 1,200 New York militia men serving under Brigadier General Abraham Ten Broeck was held in reserve behind Learned's line. In all, there were more than 8,000 Americans on the field that day, including about 1,400 men from Lincoln's command that were deployed when the action became extremely fierce. But even with the facts in my mind, even though I knew the story, I knew what would happen to Ben on this battlefield and I could not prevent it. Or could I?

From my standpoint, I could see the British grenadiers open fire but Poor's men held theirs. The terrain made the British's shooting largely ineffective, and they were already low on both men and ammunition from the previous battle that happen here and the lack of Clinton's reinforcements who were still down in New York City instead of making their way to Albany like they were supposed to have to meet up with Burgoyne's men there to attack Fort Frederick. As the British grenadiers moved closer and their bayonets were drawn, Poor's men open fired. Major Acland, who had led the British grenadiers, had fallen due to being shot in both legs. The battle was brutal, something that neither academia nor re-enactments had prepared me for. I grimaced and felt bile rise in my throat as I saw General Fraser fall off of his horse, knowing that one of Colonel Daniel Morgan's riflemen had shot him.

But where was Ben? He was sent off of the field a while ago by his commanding officer, but I didn't see where he had gone.

It was then that I heard a cry and saw his stallion gallop onto the field and rally the Patriots. It was amazing witnessing this act of bravery. General Gates had sent out a man, whose name was lost to me in that moment, to chase down Ben but the man couldn't catch him in time. The defenses on the right side of the British camp were anchored by two redoubts. The outermost one was defended by about 300 men under the command of the Hessian Heinrich von Breymann, while the other was under the command of Lord Balcarres. A small contingent of Canadians occupied the ground between these two fortifications. Most of the retreating force headed for Balcarres' position, as Breymann's was slightly north and further away from the early action. I saw Ben lead the American chase and then lead Poor's men in an attack on the Balcarres Redoubt. General Learned was preparing the attack the Breymann Redoubt and I saw Ben move toward that direction, recklessly riding between the lines and emerging unscathed. However, the end was nowhere in sight. Ben led the charge of Learned's men through the gap in the Redoubts; that exposed the rear of Breymann's position and Daniel Morgan's men had circled around them from the far side. In the heat of battle, Breymann's Redoubt was taken and Breymann was killed. Overcome with pride for my fellow Americans, I forgot what would come next.

During one of the final volleys, Ben's horse was shot and I saw him fall.

I cried out and ran from my standpoint onto the battlefield, dodging musket balls as I ran as fast as I could to get to Ben.

“Ben!” I yelled out when I got to him and held his head in my hands.

“Ahh!” he cried out in pain and I saw blood spilling from a hole in his boot. His leg had been shot and it was broken from the fall, but history would prove that he would be all right and would fight again.

“Ben, everything will be all right, I’m here,” I said as I stood and tried to gather another soldier to help me carry his wounded General off of the field.

I knew what would happen after this. Ben would be bedridden for almost six months and while his leg is still not fully healed, he will go to Philadelphia and serve as a military governor. It will be there that he enters treasonous correspondence with the British. Later, he will be given the command of the fort at West Point and plot to hand the plans over to the British by ways of John Andre. When Andre is caught, Ben will cross over to British lines and serve under William Phillips, the commander of Burgoyne’s right wing. After the war is over and the Patriots claim the victory, Ben and his wife will cross the Atlantic Ocean and live out the remainder of their natural lives in England and that will be the end of his tale.

A tear rolled down my cheek as I thought how he could have been much more than just another summer soldier, sticking around during the good times but fleeing during the bad times, not seeing the cause he told me he was for would be worth the fight. He could have been a hero.

“Sarah, do not cry,” Ben whispered as he held up a hand and wiped my tear away with his thumb, “I will be all right.”

“Ben,” I began, “don’t do it.”

“Do not do what?”

Just then, before I could explain, a sharp, stabbing pain resonated in my chest as I watched the field doctor remove the musket ball from Ben's leg.

"Ahh!" I cried out and grabbed at my chest, falling off of the small stool I had been sitting on. I could feel my body convulsing but couldn't do anything to stop it.

"Sarah!" I heard Ben's voice yell, "Sarah!"

"Sarah, can you hear me?" an unfamiliar voice asked.

A light was shone in my eyes. "Her responses are normal," another voice said.

"Uhn," I moaned, "what—what happened?" I looked around my surroundings and discovered I was in a hospital bed, the smell of sterility stinging my nose.

"Your show director said you were hit on the head by an apple. You were hit pretty hard too," the second voice, an older looking man with salt-and-pepper hair, answered.

"How long have I been out for?"

"A couple of hours," answered the first voice, a man who was probably in his mid to late 40s answered.

"There's someone here to see you," said the younger man, "you seem to be doing all right for now, so we'll leave you two alone."

As the two doctors stepped out of the room, a man stepped up to the side of my bed.

"Um, hello," he said. He had brown hair, brown eyes, and a kind smile and reminded me of...

"Ben?" I said, sounding like a question.

"Er, no. My name is James. I was the one who threw the apple that hit you. I came to apologize. I didn't know it would go that far when I threw it or cause the damage that it did."

"It's okay," I said sitting up, "I'm fine."

“How about I make it up to you? We can go out for coffee or dinner sometime.”

I looked into his eyes and at his face and all I could see was Ben, my Ben.

“Um, yeah, sure. That sounds great,” I replied, trying to muster up a smile.

* * *

For whatever reason, I was sent back in time to see the Battles of Saratoga and to meet Benedict Arnold. I had fallen in love with Ben, but I was sent back to my own time before I could warn him about the woman who would become his wife... about how she would turn him to the British and he would become the world's most notorious traitor instead of the hero he was at Saratoga. Without him rallying the troops, victory may not have been possible... America as we know it today may not have been possible. All there is now to remind us of his actions is the famous Boot Monument on the Balcarras Redoubt, which doesn't even bear his name. There was nothing I could do. Darkness had ended the day's fighting and Burgoyne had surrendered and I was sitting in a hospital bed gazing at a man named James who reminded me of the man I fell in love with on that battlefield. This just goes to show that when an apple is involved, all is fair in love and war; everything happens for a reason and everything turns out how it is meant to be.



The Shadow Always Knows

A.K. Wallace

though happy or sad
you are always here
in both light and dark
lurking in plain sight
you push me on
when I cannot seem to move
lending support
through sorrow and cheer
you hold me back
when impatience strikes
challenging beliefs
with a word or a glance
unfailing you return
never hiding for long
as it once was
so it will always be



Dark Politics

Marla Todd

I'd dined with The Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, alone. It had been a private affair with only the two of us. I'd acquired signatures, state secrets, just the right amount of English blood, and enough charm to last me a while. He came away from it feeling quite satisfied with himself, though a little pale.

Heading to my private quarters I was stopped cold in my tracks. There he was, my dear old friend at the end of the hall.

"Well, this is random," I said to the familiar apparition.

"I have been waiting for you, Madam."

"I never imagined you'd stoop so low as to be a ghost."

He smiled. "I never imagined you'd stoop so low as to be president."

I smiled back. "The first woman president. I bet you never thought you'd see that in your lifetime."

"I'm dead my dear. Remember?" He laughed in a cold manner that made my breath turn to a cloud before my face. "I loved you," he whispered.

"You used me."

"You used me as well, Madam."

"So I did. But times have changed, Mr. President."

The ghost smiled and came close. "You amaze me, Madam. Never has there been a president so popular or successful. The economy is good. Unemployment is below 2%. We're not in a war and our schools are working. How do you manage it?"

I shrugged. "I love the American people. I love my country."

The ghost laughed. "You don't have to campaign with me, dear."

I had to smile. At one time we'd been so close. "Why did it take so long for you to show yourself?" I asked.

"The White House isn't my usual haunt. If I'd known you'd be wearing that dress I would have come back sooner."

"I'm not even wearing a corset."

"Or a bustle. That is one reason I never gave women the vote, you do know that? Damned bustles looked so silly. Who could take a creature who wears one of those things seriously?"

A song blasted from my hand. The ghost looked startled.

"My daughter just texted me." I held up my phone. She was just down the hall but I'd promised I'd check in before I went to bed.

"How has she been doing since...? I'm so sorry."

"She's doing ok. Some days are hard, especially holidays and special events." My husband had passed away during my first term of an unexpected illness. I would never admit it out loud but grief, combined with my dedication to the job, shot my ratings in the polls up to 97.4%.

I looked fondly upon my ghostly friend, a great man who was rarely remembered. One of the many forgotten 19th century presidents. Just so many men with beards. What a shame.

"I wish I could hold you," I said, remembering a time long ago when that was possible.

“I should have asked you to turn me when you had a chance,” he said, standing so close I could feel him but not touch him.

Passing my hand through his heart, I told him the truth. “You made a good president but you would have been a horrible vampire, sir.”

“I suppose you’re right. Good night my dear,” he said with a gentle smile. “Be careful.”

I smiled. “I will, my darling. I will.”



Love Storm Born

David W. Stone

The wind-whipped branches *swooshed* along the roof, gathering the snow into piles and dumping it to the ground, where it landed with soft plops in the deep snow and loud *whumps* on the wind-swept sidewalk. Elsewhere, where the roof had been swept clean; the branches clackety-clacked along the roof tiles. Inside the house was complete darkness and silence except in the living room, where a fire in the fireplace crackled and popped.

In front of the fireplace a large pile of blankets seemed to have been casually tossed. But, if one were a fly on the wall, one might notice that one side of the pile shifted. A small white hand, looking for all the world like a fat, white spider, crept timidly out, pausing to check the temperature of the room. Having accomplished its mission, the hand slipped back under the blankets, and for the next few minutes all was still again. Then, along another side of the pile, a mop of curly blonde hair slowly emerged, followed by a face whose eyes darted this way and that, peering through the darkness.

Finding nothing threatening lurking in the darkness, Jessica pulled herself out from under the blankets and reached for the flashlight. Turning it on, she buzzed the room with it and then went to a drawer and pulled out some batteries. Walking over to a table, she picked up a radio, changed the batteries, turned it on and tuned in to a local news station.

“...of the storm system still moving slowly through the Boston area. Public officials are asking people to please remain in their homes, as the streets are much too dangerous to be driving on. At this time, several thousand

people are without power due to an auto accident involving a transformer, as well as several downed wires. Police and Fire personnel are answering calls by the hundreds, and even the manhunt for 'The Boston Butcher,' serial killer of at least twenty-seven young women has been put on hold for the duration. We can only hope that this monster is holed up somewhere warm, and not roaming the city. In other news, the Red Sox have announced that..."

Jessica turned off the radio and thought about a hot cup of tea. Thank God for gas stoves on a night like this. As she headed toward the kitchen, she heard a loud THUMP coming from the area of her front door. She froze, listening. Her diligence was rewarded with a soft groan. Hurrying into the kitchen, she picked up a chef's knife and headed toward the door. Next to the door was a small window. Jessica peeked through it, and gasped. She saw, on her porch, the prone, unmoving figure of a man.

Cautiously, she aimed her light through the window and shone it up and down over the body. As the light moved over his waist, she saw crusted, frozen blood and a small seep of fresh blood. The light moved up further and settled on the face, which was beaten and... a whispered gasp escaped her lips.

"Jim!"

She quickly opened the door to reach him. Jim was a neighbor, a couple of doors down from her. She carefully dragged him into the house, shutting the door behind them. Further effort managed to get him over to the fireplace, where she covered him with the pile of blankets. She went to the kitchen, started the water on the stove, stepped into the bathroom and grabbed some towels. Back in the living room, she gently moved the

blankets, pulled up his shirt and examined his wound. It looked deep, and continued to bleed sullenly.

Leaving it for the moment, she went to the kitchen, got the water and returned to the living room. She cleaned the wound as best she could, laid a towel over it and then proceeded to the bedroom to retrieve the sash from her bathrobe. She used the sash to bind the towel over the wound. After covering him back up, she slumped down and drifted off to sleep.

She awoke stiff and sore, propped against a chair leg. Once her eyes were open, she noticed three things: the fire was out, the power was on and Jim was staring at her. Groaning, she sat up and checked his side. The towel was not completely soaked with blood, but it was close. She sat back and looked at him.

“Jim, you really need to see a doctor. What happened?”

“I... I’m not... sure. I was walking home... something hit me... and I woke up here. What did happen?”

“I found you on my porch. I think after the doctor, maybe you should see the police.”

“Yeah... although I don’t know what they could do. Any evidence outside is under a foot of snow.” He groaned. “I need to get home... see how the cats are faring. Then I’ll go to the hospital.”

“Do you need me to drive you?”

“No, thank you. I’ll manage. When everything is done, perhaps I could take you out to dinner... sort of a Thank You?”

“It’s a possibility. Get better and we’ll see.”

Well, Jim got better and they went to dinner. That led to another dinner, which led to another dinner, which led to breakfast... in bed... at Jessica’s house. During this

time, whatever the Red Sox had announced apparently worked, as they began winning games in a serious manner. The Boston Butcher had also stepped up his efforts, and his current tally was thirty-four dead girls. Things progressed along swimmingly for everyone, and after about a year, Jim and Jessica were married.

Life went on, as it often does, and before anyone realized it, thirty years had passed. Jim and Jessica became involved with their church, with their community and, after the children started arriving, with their school and PTA. The children grew, as children do, went off on their own and ended up with children of their own.

As this particular thirty-year period drew to a close, a couple of things happened that no one really saw coming: The Red Sox made it to the World Series, and Jim was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer... terminal pancreatic cancer. He opted not to have any chemo or radiation treatments, instead preferring to enjoy what was left of his life with his love. And, enjoy life they did, for another three months.

There came the day, however, when he could no longer rise from bed, and soon he sank into a semi-coma, and his family knew the end was near. The doctor was called, who informed them that it was time to say good-bye, and perhaps a priest for the last rites would be a good idea. The children came, weeping, to say their good-byes, as did the grandchildren.

During this time, Jim swam in and out of consciousness, and finally, Jessica told him that their local priest was there. The good father came in, and as he did, Jim seemed to revive and awaken a bit. Jessica quietly slipped out of the room.

“Son, before the last rites, would you like me to hear your confession?”

“Yes, Father, I would... skipping all the small crap... Father, I have to say... I am the Boston Butcher...”

“You’re the one who killed thirty-some girls thirty years ago? I’m not sure about absolution if that can’t be remedied in some way...”

“Father... I know there is no absolution for me... but I have to get it out there... yes... I am the killer... but you don’t completely understand... Father... I never stopped the killing. The current and final total is... God! The pain... let me rest. Father, I’m up to one hundred and seventy..... oooooonnnneee.....”

The last word came out with a long exhalation... followed by complete silence.



Keep your bubble headed Barbies
fobs for your chains
Give me Dorthy Parker and Anais Nin
Unshackled women, who know of the flesh
and the pleasures within
Cheroot smoking goddesses
who drink the witches' brew
Warrior maidens, who know my cause
And twixt tangled sheets where parted thighs
are quenched, your cries feed my frenzy

© Daniel E. Tanzo



Crystal Hearts

Marla Todd

“Do you still love her?” Crystal snarled. The vase flew across the room and shattered next to Jack’s shoulder.

Jack kept his hands on his hips, refusing to retreat from the angry woman in front of him. “Not for forty years. What do I need to do to prove my love to you? We won a war, rebuilt a country and raised four successful children. We run a multinational corporation we’ve built from dust. We’ve built a good life.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“Damn you, woman. I’m not going to answer you, either.”

“Why not?”

“You’re the wizard. Read my bloody mind.”

Crystal threw a bookend, making perfect aim. It crashed into his forehead and knocked him onto the floor. Jack looked up through a heavy flow of blood coming from the cut on his forehead.

“You are my heart, Crystal, and I will love you forever even if you kill me first,” Jack said, glaring at her.

A much younger, tall handsome man with sparkling amber eyes and waist length reddish-brown hair cautiously came through the door.

“What the hell happened to you?” he said to Jack.

The older couple both turned to him.

“Nothing,” they said in unison.

Two small children tumbled into the room.

“Go play downstairs,” he told his kids, “your grandparents are being a bit bad right now.” He looked at his parents with his hands on his hips and a look of disgust on his face. “When are you going to stop this behavior? You’re a bad example for the children.”

“What behavior?” asked his father with a wicked grin, wiping the blood off his face with his shirt sleeve.

Crystal turned on the younger man. “Now that you’re here Justin, I want to tell you that now is not a good time to tell me to be nice and polite. Nobody knows where Robert Nightlander is. He has vanished off the face of the earth. I told you and your father that we should have killed him years ago. I don’t care who he might be related to, the man is evil.”

“We’ve located him. He is in the Northern Wastes but has moved around some. You know we can’t go up there.”

“Treaties be damned. I’ll go up there and kill him myself if I have to, before he kills your sister. He’s

wearing her out, Justin. He's going to kill her if she can't find a man with the kind of love it takes to... damn it. It was your duty, and your father's, to protect her."

"Simon is keeping her safe. He made a promise as well as many others. Robert can't touch her as long as she stays in the Northern Kingdom." Justin gave Crystal a hug. She turned away and retreated.

* * *

The Northwestern Kingdom. What good was it having her beloved daughter Liv among barbarians, who sat in the sun all day and smiled like neutered sheep? Not to mention the fact their queen was a traitor to the Crystal Mountain republic – the kind of woman who got by with cunning and looks rather than courage and conviction. She knew what it was to have courage and conviction. She knew what it was like to put her life on the line for everything she loved and believed in. Sacrifice is something that bitch in the Northwestern Kingdom would never know.

"He fears Simon because Simon fears no man or wizard. But he can't protect her all the time. He has his own wife and family to take care of. What if Robert went after Simon's babies? It would be the blood of children on your hands, Jack."

It wasn't war but it was a mess. Her adopted daughter was now being stalked by a madman and living in another land in which her husband's former partner and lover was Queen. It was all out of her control. The thought of losing everything she'd fought for was too much to bear.

Crystal excused herself so they wouldn't see her tears and went alone out on the balcony, as was her habit when she needed to be by herself. She took a deep breath of the cool mountain air.

* * *

Memories of a time long ago came rushing back. On another dark night thirty-one years ago she'd gone out to the town pretending to be another casualty of war. Another amputee, disfigured and homeless. She crawled under the fence with the plans unseen. It was a rush, a job well done. She hadn't been caught that time. Her luck would run out sooner or later but it didn't matter. What mattered was that she took the maps from the enemy.

As she made her way through the dark woods she tried to get the memory out of her mind of the dead woman. Even in death she was beautiful, her dark hair framing the face, the glassy dead green eyes, the blue gown torn at the neckline. Her throat had been cut. A man's name had been carved into her chest. She'd been dumped by the side of the road.

Crystal weighed the body down and rolled her into the river and left her, taking only her jewelry and a lock of hair for the family. She had been a spy and Crystal's best friend.

Crystal was on her way to find the man who had killed her friend.

Silently she picked the lock on the back door. Her prey was home alone, in a chair in front of the fire. Her arm slid around his neck and she slammed him into the floor. She was on him, his arms snapped behind his back as she clipped on restraints. She could feel the fear in him.

His struggles were useless as she cut his skin from his chin up around his face, deep and steady. He screamed in pain.

"You can dish it out but you can't take it, you pansy assed puke," she taunted him. "Tell me where Doran Nightlander is headed or I'll peel your face off."

"I don't know!" he cried.

“Liar!” she said.

He was breathing hard.

“Tell me.”

“Don’t hurt me. I have a family,” the man begged like a child.

“We all have families. The minute you took the side of the Nightlander you sentenced yours to death. So where is Doran heading?”

“South along the Greenville Highway.”

“Liar!” she said, pushing her knife under the skin of his forehead and separating it from his skull.

He screamed.

“North on the old road!” the man gasped.

“How long ago?” She wiggled the knife under his skin again.

“They left at dawn.”

“Did they have the boy, Robert with them?”

“No.”

“Liar liar liar.” She grabbed the skin on his forehead and pulled it down, exposing his skull.

He screamed again.

She smiled and said gently, “Tell me where the plans are and I’ll leave you alone. Don’t tell me and I’ll kill your children. I know where they are tonight.”

“You don’t know anything.”

“I’m a wizard, you fucking puke. I can feel the fear in you and tell that you’re telling me lies. I can sense where you hid your wife and babes. If you want I can grab the memories out of your brain and erase everything in there, so tell me where the plans are.”

“Under the bed, in the yellow box.”

“Telling the truth. Good boy.”

She looked under the bed and pulled out the box. There it was – a map of the prison. And it was real. She

took the entire box in case it contained more useful information.

Walking over to him, she looked around the room. It was the beautiful sitting room of a successful man. This successful man's face was now bruised but could be fixed. It wasn't a bad face. Nice friendly lines, sensuous lips. He had lovely golden brown eyes, now bloody red and bruised.

The sounds of horses were outside the door. He knew they were coming. He'd planned on trapping her by giving her the directions and stalling her for time. No such luck for him tonight.

She leaned close to his face.

"You raped and marked a woman called Lauren then dumped her body in the woods. What was that about?"

"She was a traitor."

"She was my friend," Crystal snarled and drove her knife through the man's eye and into his brain. Running out the back of the house, she escaped into the night.

A few hours later Crystal entered the rebel compound with a shower of hugs and tears. After being almost a day late they thought they'd lost her – again. When she'd cleaned up and changed clothes she joined the crew in the main house.

Commander Crystal Fox returned to her outpost in the southern part of the Crystal Mountains. She was welcomed back as legend. Crystal Fox of the Crystal Mountains. As sparkling and sly as her namesake. A fearless, passionate and lovely young heroine, brave and true. Well, maybe not so lovely anymore. She'd been to hell and lived to tell.

Almost a year before news of her escape and that of Jack Snowhawk from the Baron's notorious

Blacktower prison camp had everyone in the country looking for her. At first there was big money for anyone taking her alive. Now they wanted her dead. It was an honor to be wanted so by her enemy. It meant she was doing her job.

Everyone at the compound talked about Jack. Was he really the wild and brilliant mind they'd all heard about? Had he really stood up to everyone? What were the children like?

She'd met the children he'd adopted or stolen, considering whose side of the story you heard. Nobody could believe he had them. The boy was bright and with a personality like sunshine. The skittish girl was special in her own ways, a wizard thought to be more powerful than the evil Baron or any of his clan.

Crystal always had her standard answer. Yes, Jack Snowhawk was fearless and crazy but he was brilliant and a visionary. One day he'd bring their country back and into the future. Most of all, Jack was a man of honor.

After Jack always came talk of the legendary beauty Hycinth Shadowford. Everyone was always asking Crystal if Jack still loved her. He'd said vows to Hycinth and then she left him. It was a mystery why she vanished only to show up later in the newspapers of a foreign land.

Crystal heard their whispers. Was Jack over Hycinth Shadowford? Would he ever be over her? Poor Jack, how could any man get over having loved the most beautiful woman in the world?

* * *

"Do you believe in true love?" one of the younger women asked as Crystal looked at the wall chart of their battle zones. "Commander Fox?"

Crystal turned, weary of the small talk. “Right now I don’t have the luxury of thinking of true love and trivial stories about shallow romances.”

“Being a fighter doesn’t mean you have to be a cold unfeeling bitch,” said Derek, a spy who’d once been her lover.

Crystal fingered the dagger by her side. “Don’t you dare insinuate that I am cold and unfeeling. I have watched my friends and family die in the worst possible ways. My heart will never mend. My pain will never go away. I live for the memory of those I’ve watched die by the hands of those we’re fighting.”

Derek’s expression softened. “We’ve all watched our friends and family die off in front of us but Crystal, we’re still alive. They wouldn’t want us to just give up and never feel love in our arms again.”

“I haven’t given up. I’ve given over my entire body and soul to the revolution,” she answered.

Derek was popular with the woman but never touched Crystal after she’d returned from her imprisonment in the Blacktower. He, like so many other men, was afraid of her. He also knew it was best to leave her alone when she was angry like this.

She filled up her wine glass and stood by the fire, trying to forget the sickening rush she’d felt as she tortured and killed her enemy just a few hours earlier. At one time she had been a science teacher at a pretty little school with window boxes full of flowers and smart, happy children. She’d imagined that one day she’d have children of her own. But then she’d seen her longtime lover buried alive because he’d had the misfortune of being born a powerful wizard. At that moment, all hope failed until the next day when she’d been thrown into the

tower with Jack Snowhawk. It seemed like a million years ago.

The other women continued to talk as if Crystal was fully engaged with them.

“I’m surprised you didn’t fall in love with Jack Snowhawk. God, he’s gorgeous,” said one.

“A year locked in a tower with him and I’d be sated for life,” another giggled.

Jack was gorgeous but Crystal didn’t want them to forget that he was also a cunning fighter and a true patriot and friend to all who believed in freedom.

“I’m alive because of Jack Snowhawk and I’d give my life for his. But romance was the last thing on my mind, and his for that matter.”

The others looked at Crystal with disbelief. One spoke up. “That is hard to believe, Crystal. Romance had to have crossed your mind. I know what you were like before all of this.”

‘All of this’ is what they would say to avoid the words ‘war’ and ‘revolution’ and ‘dismembered’.

“It’s been a long day. I’m heading upstairs. But get me if anything comes up.” She started out of the room, tired of the company.

Behind her back, Crystal heard the conversation pick up again. A pretty girl, who was also a talented code breaker, gave a snarky laugh

“Commander Fox is in love with the war. We’ve all seen her practically have an orgasm over a good strategy in the map room. It’s almost obscene.”

Crystal spun around threw her dagger so fast it pinned the woman’s coat sleeve to the wall.

“I’m not completely deaf or blind. If you forget that I’ll take you out so fast you won’t know what hit you.” She yanked the dagger out of the wall and left the

room. Since she'd come back she forced herself to think of nothing but the war effort. Every other dream was gone. If the war ever ended she'd deal with it then.

"After Hyacinth Shadowford, does she really think Jack Snowhawk would settle for a disassembled freak like her?" Crystal heard one of the women whisper behind her back.

"Say it out loud!" she called behind her, "fucking cowards. Keep it up and you'll no longer have my protection."

Crystal climbed out to the roof, pulling her coat collar tight around her neck.

Jack. How could she think he'd love her the way he had loved his first partner?

Hyacinth was so absolutely beautiful and perfect in every way possible. Crystal involuntarily adjusted her eye patch and folded the stump of her arm in her lap, drawing her knees up close to her chest. She'd once been pretty; not beautiful like Hyacinth but she'd been pretty enough to turn heads and make men long for her touch.

When she and Jack were prisoners in the tower together a yellowed newspaper had been brought up. It was in the common language used by the rest of the world. She could hardly read it but she could see the pictures in full color.

On the front was a picture of Hyacinth Shadowford, her breathtaking beauty almost jumping off the fading page. Hyacinth had abandoned the vows she'd made to Jack, escaped the country, gone to a new land and married a prince. She was now a Real Princess, whatever the hell that meant. Hyacinth's own father had started the revolution and now she had escaped and betrayed them all by turning her back on the cause. The prince she'd married was as handsome as one of the

Nightlander Barons and smiling on his beautiful family. A later issue in the same bundle of pages showed Hyacinth with a baby in her arms. A small beautiful blonde girl and a darling dark haired boy who had the green eyes of the Crystal Mountain folks sat at her feet. From what she'd read in the yellowed paper was that the mysterious new princess had adjusted to her new country and was adored by her people.

Their prison guard said, "She was your partner, Jack. Now the only woman you've got, if you can call her a woman, is this creature here." He spoke with an ugly sneer, kicking the mutilated Crystal out of her place in the shadows.

Jack was clearly disturbed by what he saw in the yellowed newspaper, but after that day he never mentioned Hyacinth Shadowford. Crystal never asked him about it.

Leaning against the side of the building, the twenty-five-year-old Crystal stared into the fog and thought of her time with Jack. She missed the way he'd brush her hair with his fingers while he sang to her. She missed their long talks and star watching, huddled in the prison tower under a blanket together. She missed being curled up with him at night as they slept. She knew he kissed her hair and shoulders as she slept, or pretended to sleep in his arms. She heard him whisper the words, "I love you, Crystal," thinking she didn't hear him. She missed the fire in his eyes. She missed the way he talked about the cause and the children. She missed him so much it ached. She missed the way he listened to her hopes and dreams, never once telling her that it was hopeless to still dream.

After they were rescued, he'd made love to her for the first time. He told her that he loved her, his eyes glistening with tears.

Crystal told him they had to go their separate ways, for the war. She was needed in the South; he had to be with his children and run the intelligence operations in the North. Like a good soldier, she accepted the reality of the situation knowing she'd probably never see him again.

Crystal never cried. Not when she watched as her wizard lover was buried alive. Not when they took her eye, not when they cut off her ear, not when the ax fell and severed her fingers, then chopped off her arm. Not when they cut deeply into her face and locked her in a tower for months without hope. She didn't even cry when she watched Jack ride away to the North.

Now she sat on the roof and sobbed, her heart breaking for the man who'd loved a beautiful princess. She loved Jack Snowhawk – the man every woman desired – the man she'd let go.

Years later they reunited and vowed their love forever, but sometimes the thought of everything she'd lost and might still lose hurt more than she could bear.

* * *

Her side became suddenly warm and she looked to a child snuggled up to her. She was back in the here and now, more than twenty years later.

"Don't cry, Grams. Don't think about those old dark times." Her twelve-year-old grandson held her hand.

"I'm sorry. Everyone thinks I'm a brave old warhorse but I'm not. Only you know my secret."

"I love you."

"You are my heart and soul, dear child."

"Heart and soul, Grams."

She looked up to see her own Jack standing by the door with a smile, pressing a bandage to his face. His long black curls were now flecked with gray but his green eyes still held the fire that could ignite the passion in her body

and soul. He was still as handsome as he'd been thirty-one years ago. She still loved him more than ever.

In their own way, they'd come together as a family that despite war and heartbreak, would last forever.



Love in a Mist

J. Harrison Kemp

REVELATION

Yugyn Solonus had a comfortable chair while he witnessed the death of yet another world. In the past Terrestrial year he'd seen two dozen such planets, thriving and beautiful, succumb to an unsolvable interplanetary contagion the Expanse' Science Division had labeled the Terraphage.

Pyramus, and its verdant moon Thisbe, were dead, having suffered through the final cycle of dissolution. Yugyn could only speculate what the planet's demise meant to his father, but to him the death of Pyramus was well-nigh unbearable. For it was on Pyramus, a paradise fertile and clement, that a nascent love had come to fruition.

Four years ago the Science Division had delegated Yugyn's father, the renowned Doctor Theneum Solonus to head a research expedition to analyze and resolve the Terraphage crisis. Over the subsequent year the fleet and its personnel had been assembled, among them the recognized Kresh'idan scientist Teth'suya Huro'sho and his daughter, Kahs'umii. Three years ago Yugyn and Kahs'umii had fallen in love, yet it was just three weeks ago that either of them had realized it, in the Labyrinthine Gardens of Pyramus.

The vine of the Cathedral Creeper was porous and welcoming, host to flowering plants from a thousand worlds. Growing congruently with the Trellis rootstock, the Cathedral Creeper formed rambling corridors, their high, arching ceilings a gamut of colors and scents.

Young and exotically beautiful, Kahs'umii reached for a flower she had grown to love. "Many of these flowers are from your Earth?"

"Yes, Pyramus began as a human colony," Yugyn replied.

"This is my favorite." Kahs'umii's willowy fingers slipped beneath the filamentous leaves of the flower, its numerous sepals shared the pale blue hue of her skin. "What is its name?"

He thought he'd heard wit in her voice, even though the Kresh'ida were incapable of humor. "You know its name," he smiled and placed a hand along one side of her raised spine, "I've told you often enough."

"Yes, though I do enjoy hearing you say it."

"Love-in-a-mist."

"Yes, Love-in-a-mist." Her slender fingers withdrew from the plant. "I will weep for this world," she said softly, "when it is gone."

He touched her chin and her eyes came to him, avian-like, large and lilac-hued they were secreting a viscous milky fluid.

"And what are these if not tears?"

She stooped as though shamed, turned and scurried to a stone bench.

Yugyn followed quickly.

"What's wrong?"

She sat. "My father is returning home and I must go with him."

"But ... your father's tenure is indefinite."

"The Science Division has already dispatched his replacement."

"Why is he leaving?"

"He would not tell me."

"Well, when will I see you again?"

“I cannot say, for I do not know.”

Yugyn dropped to one knee and took her hands in his. “Then ... I’ll go with you.”

“That’s impossible. You have a responsibility.”

“Then you ... you’ll stay with me.”

“I can’t do that, my father would not permit it. He doesn’t approve of your interest in me as it is.”

“Interest? I love you.”

“And I you. Now you know why I weep. When this world dies, what we have found here dies with it.”

“I cannot accept that.”

“You must, matters cannot be changed.”

An unbearable weight overtook his head and compelled it to her lap. “What can I do?”

Her fingers caressed his head, generating a soothing pulsation. “I’ve imagined a life with you, far removed from all this sorrow and death.”

He said nothing.

“You make me feel as though I could laugh.”

“Have you never laughed?”

“Never, but I had hoped that you could teach me.”

“There’s still ... time.”

“How can we not know?”

Yugyn flinched out of his reverie, unaccustomed to anger from his father. “What?”

“We can generate stars, grow entire worlds around them, engender life upon those worlds and see it prosper. Our knowledge is boundless, our technology unrestricted, the totality of the Expanse’s resources have been set upon this pestilence and a solution continues to elude us!”

Yugyn thought better of it, but nonetheless spoke up, “Kahs’umii’s father has hypothesized that the Terraphage is not a natural problem.”

“Doctor Teth’suya is insane!”

“Insane?”

“He blames demons and evil, and other such nonsensical antiquated philosophies for the Terraphage.”

“I don’t care if you disagree with him, he should be here.”

“We ... we had an argument. That is why he’s absent.”

“It doesn’t feel right. This has become an observance we’ve always shared with them.”

“You care for them both, I know, so do I, but—”

“—I love her.”

“What?” He turned back. “Who?”

“Kahs’umii. I love her.”

“Preposterous.”

“It’s the truth.”

“Does she know?”

“Of course she knows! She loves me, too.”

His father turned fully to the viewport. “Teth’suya has been called to appear before the Kresh’idan Science Assembly.”

“Why now?”

“I ... I reported him.”

“You what? How could you in good conscience?”

“As the head of this expedition I felt it only proper.”

“Because of his theory?”

“His theory is archaic, based on superstition, not science. He’s lost sight of the goal of this expedition and—”

“—And what about Kahs’umii?”

“Her place is with her father.”

He stood. “Speak to him! Apologize! Make him understand.”

“Understand what? That you are in love with his daughter!”

“Yes!” he pleaded.

“Teth’suya is intractable. At this point an apology would be useless, and any appeal I could present on your behalf would be futile. I’m sorry, son.”

“Father, please. We haven’t much time.”

“What do you mean?”

“The Terraphage ... the universe is dying.”

“That’s nonsense!” His ire was growing again.

“This effort is too trivial—”

“—Trivial?” He was livid. “We head a fleet,” his finger emphasized the statement, tapping the viewport, “a fleet, dedicated to the resolution of that, that scourge! The greatest minds of the Expanse are out there, all indefinitely committed to its eradication. This fleet represents the single greatest effort ever put forth by the Expanse, and you have the audacity to call it trivial?” He was winded, unacquainted with his rage. “How are you my son?”

“Whether or not you mean that, the truth is clear.”

“What is your clear truth?”

“That what we’ve witnessed in the past three years is infinitesimal!”

“Rubbish!”

“While we sit here and watch a single world die, out there across the universe tens-of-thousands more die with it!”

“And rebirth rates are growing exponentially.”

“And seventy-percent of newborn worlds fail in the middle of their growth cycle, just admit—”

“—Admit what?”

“That we are failing!”

“No! No! I will not admit that!” His fist pounded the viewport. “We will find a solution! It is inevitable!”

“And if we don’t? If we can’t? What then?”

He shook his head. “For every question, there is an answer.”

Yugyn sat down. “You have been a scientist too long, father.”

“And you’ve not been one long enough.”

A tremor rolled through the ship. His father stepped away from the viewport as the shutter closed. “Was that in the ship?”

A second tremor initiated a klaxon.

Doctor Solonus sat down and activated the comm relay in the arm of the chair. “Captain Hector?”

“Just a moment, Doctor.”

“Captain, what’s happening?”

“A moment, Doctor!”

“Open the shutter,” Yugyn said.

“Pointless, it secures during an alarm—Captain!”

Yugyn sprang up and activated the cybernetic interface implanted in his left radial bone.

“Do not hack that!” his father warned.

“You want to know what’s happening, don’t you.”

A second alarm sounded as the shutter opened.

“Doctor Solonus! Has there been a breach?”

“No, Captain.”

“The flotilla’s under attack.”

The security escort ships were being decimated.

His father came to the viewport. “Brigands.”

The door to the observation lounge opened to two ScD officers, one of whom rushed to the viewport and closed the shutter.

“Doctor Solonus, we’re gathering a portion of the science personnel here,” said the other officer.

“Commander, lock down the personnel,” Captain Hector ordered.

“Yes, sir.”

His fellow officer was ushering crew members into the room.

“We’re being boarded!”

“Boarded?” Doctor Solonus was disbelieving. “Captain!”

“Not now, Doctor!”

“But I’m in charge here!”

“Doctor Solonus,” the Commander said.

“What?”

“Sit down and shut your mouth!”

Yugyn’s father fell into the chair and fumed.

The exterior turmoil of space seemed to be rapidly moving inward. The ScD officers moved to the door for the escalating din. A thud struck outside the door and the panels were pierced by a blade, it twisted with a shriek and the carbon fiber panels where warped. An energy bolt blazed through the breach, killing the ScD officer.

Cursing the Commander returned fire, sprang to the rupture and was seized by a massive hand, bristling with chitinous spikes, it dragged him screaming through the hole.

Following a sickening thump, a massive Karrakyn broke through the deformed panels, tearing them from their tracks.

“This is outrageous!” Doctor Solonus shouted.

“Shut up!” The Karrakyn clumped away in a small circle. “Captain, the science personnel are secure.”

Yugyn couldn’t hear the conversation.

The Karrakyn turned back. “Who’s in charge here?”

“I am,” Doctor Solonus declared.

“Come with me.”

Doctor Solonus hesitated.

“I said move!”

Doctor Solonus grabbed Yugyn’s shoulder and took him in tow.

On the bridge of The Euclid the Captain and crew had been interned on the passenger gallery, on their knees, hands bound to the guardrail.

“Captain,” the Karrakyn said.

The Captain’s chair wheeled to reveal a sleek Skleryttin male, under his armor his body was a segmented shell of purple dappled chitin. He stood, drew his blade and leant upon it as nonchalantly as a dignitary would a walking stick “I am Captain Kassassin Korymsus, and I require your ship.”

“This is a science vessel,” Dr. Solonus objected, “it’s of no value to you.”

“And we can all see how the Expanse lavishes its Science Division with endless resources,” the Captain replied. “This ship is massive and very well bestowed.”

“You mean to disassemble her?” Dr. Solonus asked.

“While your equipment and the matter of this vessel would bring a reasonable yield, I have other concerns,” Korymsus said.

“Present them!” Dr. Solonus said.

Korymsus sighed. “I have been betrayed and my ship sabotaged by my accomplice in the endeavour to plunder your flotilla. Consequently I require the use of your vessel to escape.”

“Valid,” Dr. Solonus said, “but theft nonetheless.”

“Well, we are pirates,” he said, rousing laughter from his followers. “Regardless, the bridge controls are

inactive. I had hoped one of you would be able to explain why.”

“Drive systems are offline,” Captain Hector said, “we’re locked out. Even I can’t override the command codes. No one can.”

“Regrettable,” Korymsus said. “And the estimated time before your Security Division arrives?”

“Now? Within minutes,” Captain Hector replied.

Yugyn stepped forward. “The Chushiro, where is she?”

“Be silent, Yugyn!” his father commanded.

“The boy asked a question,” Korymsus said, “why silence him?”

“He’s my son,” Dr. Solonus said, “he’s to obey me.”

“Valid, but I’d like to hear him out, nonetheless,” said Korymsus. “Ask your question.”

“The Chushiro,” Yugyn said, “the Kresh’idan science vessel, what happened to it?”

“Ehxinus, the frazz that betrayed me has seized the Kresh’idan ship. No doubt he will be underway with it by now.”

“And its personnel?”

“Taken prisoner. Why?”

“A scientist assigned to the Chushiro,” Yugyn said, “I need to find her.”

“Need? For what purpose?”

“I ... I love her.”

The brigands jeered.

“And why should I help you?” Korymsus asked.

“Because I can help you,” Yugyn said.

“Truly?” Korymsus was intrigued.

“His kind cannot be bargained with,” Captain Hector cautioned.

“Matters are quite the opposite,” Korymsus said. “As it stands, my kind is unquestionably open to bargaining.” He lifted his blade toward Yugyn. “Now then, boy, what are your terms?”

“I can override the command codes. I’ll give you this ship, if you’ll help me get her back.”

“A respectable endeavour.” Captain Korymsus lowered his blade and extended an arm toward the drive controls. “The deal is struck, if you will.”

“Don’t do it!” Captain Hector ordered. “The Security Division will be here in moments.”

“And we’ll be nothing more than hostages,” Yugyn replied.

“With or without control of this ship, we are his hostages,” Captain Hector said.

“A show of good faith then,” said Korymsus. “All personnel will be evacuated to my ship. It’s immobile, but capable of sustaining life.”

“And what of my son?” Doctor Solonus asked.

Korymsus grinned. “The boy will follow his heart.”

Yugyn approached the command console and primed his interface.

“A bio-embedded processing system,” Korymsus remarked. “Very expensive.”

“The boy could hack anything,” said a Gondozion.

“What’s he working at?” asked the Karrakyn.

“A holographic interface panel, only the boy can see it,” Korymsus replied.

“There,” Yugyn said, “the controls are active.”

“Good on you, boy. Tailsnikk, evacuate the crew.”

“Aye, Captain,” said the Karrakyn.

“You can’t do this!” Doctor Solonus protested.

“It’s all right, father. I’ll be fine.”

“They’ll kill you, Yugyn,” Captain Hector said.

“No harm will come to the boy,” Korymsus said.

“You’re to be trusted?” Captain Hector spat on the deck as he was led out.

“Open the shutters,” Korymsus ordered.

The Gondozion took the helm and a horned Hunslog the navigator’s station.

Yugyn went to the viewport. “There’s the Chushiro!”

“There’s nothing we can do now, boy. Not against his fleet.”

“You’re going to run?”

“As soon as possible.” Korymsus said.

“But she’s right there.”

“Fear not for your beloved, I will honor my part.”

Yugyn watched as the flotilla began to scatter. “They’re taking it all, everything and everyone.”

“That was the plan.”

“When will I see her again?”

“Soon enough, but our mutual quest of vengeance and reunion does require a deviation.”

“What do you mean?”

“This is a vessel of science, woefully ill-equipped to oppose a pirate frigate. Ehxinus has a large ship, well armed; we will need to match it if we’re to have any chance of rescuing your beloved.”

“Couldn’t the Euclid’s defensive weapons be modified?”

“My dear boy, there is no such thing as a defensive weapon, and she would need far more than simple modifications, an overhaul is in order, a task both costly and protracted. Besides, the Security Division will no doubt be searching for this vessel, thus it is a hindrance.”

“So, where do we find another ship?”

"I know a place and there, this ship will net us a fair profit."

"I've lived on this ship for three years."

"Mine was a home for over a decade. Sadness and sacrifice are grim partners, yet submissions must be made if we're to be successful."

Yugyn nodded. "Of course."

"Captain," Tailsnikk's voice came over the comm, "we're empty."

"Outstanding. Yapko, at the ready."

"Where are we going?" Yugyn asked.

"Sulfur Jet City."

"Captain," the Hunslog said, "the Security Division's arrived."

"Now, Yapko," Korymsus commanded.

"We're away," Gondo Zion said.

Yugyn stood at the viewport and watch the distance mount between him and Kabs'umii. Moments later she was gone.

REQUIEM

Yugyn hadn't slept deeply or barely at all when a wiry Murterian named Skysha came to wake him.

Stepping onto the bridge Yugyn was dazed by the sight of Sulfur Jet City. "That's ... a station? It's immense."

"It is a Galan class industrial platform; its primary yield is sulfur."

"How does it function?"

"It routinely purchases small moons and in effect devours them to extract and refine mineral deposits. Asteroid fields are another quarry."

"Where will we find a ship here?"

“Sulfur Jet is administrated by a Ven’Shevanii named Reh’Keevva. She deals in such matters. Rathmunsum, scan the docking ports.”

“Aye, Captain.”

“Let us be sure we are not in baleful company.”

“What do you mean?” Yugyn asked.

“Anyone and anything could be here,” Korymsus said.

“Clear, Captain,” Rathmunsum said.

“Request docking clearance,” Korymsus said.

“Sir.”

Yugyn was looking to and fro through the viewport as the station’s magnitude quickly became indiscernible.

“Clear, Captain,” Rathmunsum reported.

The corridors of Sulfur Jet City were active with noise, mechanical reverberations that could be felt in one’s feet. A far-off clanking echoed up and down the corridor, chased irregularly by a metallic murmur.

“One must become accustomed to the blare,” Korymsus indicated.

“Is it constant?” Yugyn asked.

“Constant enough that many have gone insane,” Korymsus said.

“Weaker minded species,” Yapko detailed. “So many find their way here.”

“Yugyn,” Korymsus placed an arm across his back, “have you ever encountered a Ven’Shevanii?”

“I’ve seen one.”

“Up close?” the Captain asked.

“No.”

“And no physical encounters?”

“No. Why?”

“My boy,” Korymsus began, “Ven’Shevan females have significant vaginal fissures, large enough to encapsulate a typical male humanoid.”

“T-typical?”

Tailsnikk nudged him, chuckling. “You’ll fit.”

“Sentient beings surrender fortunes to bask in the moist warmth of a Ven’Shevanii’s Pryah’prasat, where they experience a state of euphoria some species have founded religions upon.”

“T-that’s an interesting fact.”

A lift took the group to Reh’Keevva’s outer offices. A multi-limbed Miomantii seneschal sat behind an elongated desk.

“Your business?” the seneschal asked.

“An audience with Her Ladyship,” Korymsus replied.

“Your name?”

“You know my name.”

She looked up. “Ah, yes, the pirate captain.”

“Just tell her I’m here.”

“Oh, at once.” Fingers extremely active, she soon had a reply. “Her Ladyship will receive you in her private chamber.”

“Thank you, I know where it is.”

The Ven’Shevan were known to be a large species, but Reh’Keevva was massive; far from rotund, she was sleek and beautiful. Her sharply tapered head wore a crown of cerulean tendrils that cascaded down her sinewy neck. Along her broad shoulders and upper arms her skin was a deep pearlescent turquoise that blanched along the sides of her inversely pyramidal upper torso. Her slender thorax bore two sets of smaller arms folded neatly above her waist. The only clothing she wore was a lengthy drape

that covered her thick tail, held in place by intricate chains looped under fins lining its fringes.

As she moved upon her dais Yugyn noticed a second pair of longer arms stemming from her waist toward the back.

“Your Ladyship!” Korymsus bowed low.

“Kassassin,” she greeted him warmly, her voice surprisingly soft, “a pleasure to see you again.”

“Likewise, Reh’Keevva.”

“What brings you here?”

“I have something for you. Docking bay sixteen.”

She purred, her lower thorax pivoting slightly as two of her smaller arms unfurled toward a console rising from the curved lip of her dais. “I see, Expanse Science Division, impressive, but why would I want a ship so obviously misappropriated?”

“Come now, you can have it disassembled in a matter of hours.”

“Whose hours?”

“Why yours, of course.”

“Yes, I can strip that boat. What do you want for it?”

“A ship.”

“For a ship?”

The Captain nodded. “Fit for a fight.”

Reh’Keevva’s long lower arms adjusted her skirt. “Ehxinus?”

“It follows that you know what happened.”

“I’ve had word.”

“Can you tell me where he is, Reh’Keevva?”

“I deal in substance, not information, and didn’t I warn you against going in with him?”

“You did.”

“Then we have nothing more to discuss.”

“Don’t we?”

“You’ll get your ship. I’ve just had something special refitted.”

“I need more than mere titivation.”

“You won’t be disappointed. She’s the Echidna, berthed at dry dock three, but I will need something more.”

“How much more?”

“I don’t want your finances,” Reh’Keevva said, “I want your ship.”

“My ship?” he gasped. “The Reckoning?”

“Yes.”

“It’s not mine to give, presently.”

She grinned. “Leave that to me.”

“Very well.”

“Captain, you can’t be serious!” Rathmunsum objected.

He silenced his crewman with a raised hand. “I have little choice. If you can recover it, Reh’Keevva, you can have it.”

She nodded, her tendrils wriggling. “Dry dock three.” With a glance she seemed to notice Yugyn for the first time. “Your eyes, they’re rather determined, young one.”

Yugyn dropped his head, his face bloating with fever.

“Curiosity,” Korymsus said.

“Oh? Might that be your doing?”

“I may have mentioned the Pryah’prasat.”

“Very few Ven’Shevanii prostitute themselves, child.”

“I meant no offense, Your Ladyship.”

“Kassassin, who is this boy? You once swore you would never crew with a human.”

“This is Yugyn, he is a passenger. Ehxinus has kidnapped this boy’s true love and in all likelihood will sell her into slavery.”

In the wake of a disquieting pause, she said, “I am sorry to hear that, Yugyn is it?”

“Yes, Your Ladyship.”

She smiled, revealing a wide pattern of incisors and fangs. “Please, enjoy some refreshments in our pedestrian precinct, on me.” She again touched her console.

“Thank you kindly,” Yugyn said.

“The girl is a young Kresh’idan of great beauty,” Korymsus added.

“I’ve not seen a Kresh’idan in some time.”

“Well, if you happen to,” Korymsus said.

“And when did you become a crusader?” Reh’Keevva asked.

“I owe the boy,” Korymsus replied, “my freedom for his beloved.”

“Ah, I see. One fondest desire for another.”

“Most assuredly.”

“I wish you every success.”

Korymsus bowed again. “Then we will say goodbye.”

Sulfur Jet’s dry dock was a vast open pit of steep tiers, crowded with a multitude of space craft, each swarming with activity. The mechanical crater had the aspect of an excavated moon and beyond the substructure there lingered the gleam of a not too distance star.

“There she is,” Korymsus said, “the Echidna.”

“A fine ship,” Tailsnikk said.

“It looks ... reptilian,” Yugyn remarked.

“She does, yes,” Korymsus said, “but do you think she is worth two ships?”

“If it returns Kahs’umii to me, then yes, that and more.”

“Once the stores are transferred, we will get underway. Until then, let us make ourselves at home.”

“I could use a drink,” Tailsnikk said.

The pedestrian precinct was a vast concourse that opened into rows of amphitheaters on both sides, all crowded with aliens.

“What’s that commotion?” Yugyn asked.

Korymsus gripped the boy’s shoulder. “Slavers’ market.”

Several monitors were suspended above the slavers’ market theater, displaying images and statistics of their ‘wares’.

“How can any sentient being accept slavery?” Yugyn asked.

“Many do not have the power to resist,” Korymsus said. “Typically the enslaved are the uneducated, children and ... women.”

“Women?” Yugyn’s attention drifted toward the crowd.

“Leave it be, boy,” Korymsus cautioned. “Come, have a drink with me.”

“What language is that?”

“Asseddian,” Yapko said, “a simplified commerce language.”

Yugyn activated his radial interface and translated the language.

“... beautiful young females from every corner of the Expanse!” said a bulbous Boldajak from a rostrum. “Ready to serve, satisfy or scream!” His accompanying laugh was repulsive.

“This evil is everywhere,” Korymsus said. “Come away.”

Yugyn nodded and yielded to Korymsus' grip.

"Take this young, supple Kresh'idan ...!" The face above the crowd was unmistakable.

"Kahs'umii!" Yugyn slipped away from Korymsus and dashed into the throng shouting, "Kahs'umii!"

"Yugyn, wait!"

Yugyn shoved through the horde, aliens grunting and swatting him aside while Kahs'umii's fatigued eyes searched for him on the monitors above.

"Yugyn?"

"Kahs'umii!"

"Yugyn!"

"The auction is closed!" the Boldajak said quickly. With a loud hoot of displeasure the crowd began to disperse, and a once motionless mob now surged against him.

The Boldajak was shouting orders at his underlings; each grabbed a captive and absconded offstage.

Yugyn felt a hand at his back; Korymsus vaulted over him and led the charge toward the stage. Yugyn followed as the Boldajak's cohorts retreated with their captives. Forced into an antechamber the Boldajak's men instigated a firefight. Korymsus clutched at Yugyn and pulled him to cover, but he was too focused on the Boldajak and his precious cargo to remain still. Yugyn slipped from the Captain's grasp and dashed after the four-legged slaver as he escaped down a corridor.

"Yugyn!"

The Boldajak's torso twisted as he ran, Kahs'umii shrieking as the slaver fired at Yugyn. His heart racing, Yugyn dodged the energy bolts, chasing the Boldajak into a large compartment. A blind shot ruptured a mass of pipes. Yugyn ducked the venting gas and slipped, landing hard on his back. An alarm was sounding when he got to

his feet and a heavy door had sealed him off from the Boldajak.

“Yugyn!”

“Kahs’umii!” Yugyn slapped the lucen-carbon pane, fluid spurting from beneath his hand. The Boldajak smirked, its obese fingers waving as it backed away, loping down the corridor with Kahs’umii.

Yugyn coughed, heavy spittle spraying the door. He could feel fluid filling his nostrils and sneezed several times before his sinuses became completely congested.

Yugyn’s interface was beyond his focus, his hand slithering off the door control as he slumped to the floor. There was a catwalk above him, but the supporting columns were too smooth to scale, and dripping with liquid besides. The gas venting from the ruptured pipe was liquidizing, sporadically igniting into isolated wisps of flame, linking and reigniting into larger bursts, erratic, he realized, due to the warning strobe light.

Vomiting fire, Yugyn felt a weight drop upon him, drenching him in darkness and silence. A deep throbbing filled his ears, entered his mind and opened his eyes to the stars.

REGRET

Yugyn awoke to darkness. The stars, and the marvel they had held, were gone. “Kahs’umii!”

“We are alone, you and I.” Yapko turned on a light.

“Where am I?”

“In the medical bay aboard the Echidna. If you feel well enough, the Captain wishes to see you.”

He sat up. “I think I can manage.”

“There are fresh clothes for you just there.” He pointed to the foot of the bed.

“Thank you.”

Yapko nodded and departed.

The Captain’s cabin was luxurious. Korymsus was in a dim corner, lounging in a levitating layabout, an egg-shaped cushion that banked along the back.

“This vessel’s amenities are astonishing.” While he lolled, his hands clasped over his core, one foot atop the other and rhythmically tapping, music quietly occupied the room. “I have never seen a music library so extensive. I chose something from your world’s distant past, something called ‘Goldfrapp’. It’s delightful.”

“I’ve never heard it.”

“Too long in your studies, I suppose. How are you feeling?”

“Pained, but well enough.”

“No doubt you have questions.”

“Yes.”

“Your last memory, was it one of impending doom?”

“Well, yes. I was trapped.”

“And so you were,” he swung his legs over the side and sat up, “in a chamber rapidly filling with a volatile hard vacuum lubricant known far and wide as chaos oil.”

“Chaos oil.”

Korymsus nodded. “And you can thank Reh’Keevva for your life.”

“What do you mean?”

“No doubt you saw the catwalk above the compartment?”

Yugyn nodded.

“That is how she reached you, fell upon you and shielded you just as the chamber was engulfed by flames. You see, chaos oil is gaseous until mixed with oxygen, but too much and—”

“—Shielded ...?”

“Yes, in her—”

“—I think I understand.”

“Good.” Korymsus slipped off the layabout. “Bar,” he commanded, activating a panel in the far wall, which retracted to expose layered racks of beverage bottles. Korymsus poured a drink.

“Did she ... survive?”

“The Ven’Shevan are a very robust species, what would have killed you merely injured her.” Korymsus handed him a glass. “Drink it, it will strengthen you.”

The liquid was deep blue. “It’s not an intoxicant?”

“No. I’ve no desire to corrupt you, my boy. It’s Gatho juice.”

“Gatho?”

“It’s a fruit known for its restorative qualities. Drink it.”

It smelled innocent enough, quite fragrant in fact. He sipped it.

“It’s good?”

“Delicious.” He drank.

“Now then, perhaps you’d satisfy my curiosity and tell me, what did you experience while inside her?”

Yugyn drank the remainder of his Gatho. “I’d call it a hallucination, but it felt—strangely it tasted of reality.”

“Truly? What did you see?”

“I saw a city ... a station on the edge of the universe. It was massive, larger than Sulfur Jet, larger than anything I thought possible.”

“Interesting.”

“Kahs’umii was there and we were together. Something had passed, and something else was beginning.”

“Quite the vision.”

"She was so close, Korymsus. On the other side of that door."

"We'll find her."

"I could have gotten through that door, if I'd had a weapon!"

"Are you certain?"

"Just as Tailsnikk did on the Euclid."

"With one of these?" Korymsus drew his blade.

"Yes, what is it?"

"To the inexpert it is known as a barrier blade, or a shield sword, but properly it is called a spatharge." He flourished it.

"Can anyone use it?"

"It is an intuitive weapon, which reacts to one's mind and will. It is not easily mastered."

"I wanted to hack the door, but ... I was overcome."

"The chaos oil did damage your lungs, but that's been repaired."

"It doesn't matter, I couldn't concentrate."

"You were afraid?"

"Yes." Yugyn set the empty glass on the Captain's desk.

"Understandable, but in such instances instinct can be stronger than thought. Nature over reason. That is the advantage of such a weapon."

"Can you ... can you train me?"

Korymsus sheathed his blade. "Do you want to be a warrior, or just a brigand?"

"I want to be able!"

"Able to what?" Korymsus returned the glass to the bar.

"Able to take action! Beyond fear."

"Now that is something else entirely."

“Please, Captain?”

“I can instruct you, but we’ll concern ourselves with that later.”

“Of course.”

“For now,” he rotated his wrist upward. “Tailsnikk?”

“Captain?”

“How’s Rathmunsum?”

“I think he’s more than ready.”

“Excellent. I’m on my way. Come, Yugyn.”

Yugyn followed him from the cabin. “Ready?”

“Rathmunsum has betrayed us!” Korymsus was outstripping Yugyn with long, stern strides.

“But ... when?” He hurried to keep up. “How?”

“As it happens he deleted a number of returns from the scanning log during our approach. All were vessels formerly of your flotilla.”

“He knew?”

“It would seem.”

“Then Reh’Keevva ...?”

“I can only assume that she knew far more than she claimed, but that is her way.” They were headed to the cargo bay.

“Who was that Boldajak?”

“Ehxinus has six subordinates,” Korymsus replied. “That beast was D’jedkar, his slave master, and his ship is The Shackle.”

“Can you locate that ship? Track it? We have to go after him.”

“Hopefully Rathmunsum can help us with that.”

The cargo bay was spacious, but the Echidna was no freighter. In an empty receptacle Rathmunsum had been tied to a chair and beaten.

“Has he revealed anything?” Korymsus asked.

“Only that his bladder is weak,” Tailsnikk replied. “But in any case, I haven’t asked him any questions.”

Korymsus gripped one of Rathmunsum’s horns and yanked his head back. “What were you promised?”

One of his four eyes had been dislodged. “A commission.”

“Every ship in his fleet is accounted for.”

“The Reckoning was worth his fleet thrice over!”

“Ah, is that it. Did he mention exactly how you were going to claim it?” Korymsus released the horn, snapping off the tip.

“Bribes within the Security Division, you were to be killed, I was to be released.”

“And you believed that? Pity.”

“The Security Division?” Yugyn could not believe it.

“Corruption is everywhere, my boy, the Expanse is no exception.”

“Reh’Keevva knew,” Tailsnikk said.

“Of that I have little doubt,” Korymsus said, “but we will deal with her before long.” He tossed the tip away. “Kill this fool, slowly. Come, Yugyn.” He turned to leave.

“Captyrio!” Rathmunsum spat.

Korymsus turned back. “What?”

“We were to rendezvous at Captyrio,” Rathmunsum wheezed, “and your ship would have been mine.”

“He would have killed you and taken it, fool.”

Rathmunsum sank. “Now I will never know.”

“No, you will not. Make it quick,” he told Tailsnikk.

Outside the cargo bay Yugyn heard a short, sharp scream. He could not help but stop while Korymsus walked ahead.

“Come, my boy!”

RECONSTRUCTION

Yugyn deactivated a holographic construct when Korymsus entered the briefing room.

“What are you up to?”

“I ... I was—it’s nothing.”

“Come now, Yugyn, you needn’t keep anything from me.”

“I’ve been generating a three dimensional construct of the structure I saw ... in my vision.”

“May I see it?”

Yugyn tapped the edge of the table. “Very well.” The structure was an intricate system of rings, not unlike the frame of a gyroscope. It held four spheres, three large ones orbiting a smaller central globe.

“Interesting. These oblate spheroids, habitat modules?”

Yugyn shook his head. “Planets.”

Korymsus chuckled. “Absurd.”

“Each roughly one-point-one-trillion cubic kilometers.”

“Are you confident in that fact?”

“Yes, all in controlled orbits around a central star.”

“Surely those planets are too close.”

“Solar emissions are regulated; the star is encased in a lucent-carbon sphere.”

Korymsus sighed. “That was quite the vision you had.”

“I have much more to work out, but—”

“—Captain?”

“Yes, Skysha?”

“We’ve reached Captyrio.”

“On my way.”

On the bridge, the planet was rising in the viewport.

“Captyrio,” Skysha reported. “A single vessel in orbit.”

“It’s the Chushiro!” Yugyn identified it immediately.

“No power signatures,” Skysha reported. “It’s adrift.”

“Captyrio?” Korymsus asked.

It was gray, lifeless, rife with fractures, deep and dark.

“It’s the Terraphage,” Yugyn said.

“The planet is dead?” Korymsus asked.

Yugyn nodded. “Completely.”

“Advance on the vessel, Yapko.”

“Aye.”

The Chushiro’s hull was littered with spherical beacons.

“What’s on it?” Yugyn asked.

“Marker buoys,” Skysha said, “and they’re armed.”

“Moving away,” Yapko said.

“What are they for?” Yugyn asked.

“Ehxinus has sold it,” Korymsus replied. “A salvage team will have the codes to disarm the buoys.”

“There’s a ship powering up,” Skysha stated. “Directly opposite us. It’s moving.”

“To intercept?” Korymsus asked.

“No,” she replied, “it’s fleeing.”

“It’ll be gone by the time we round the planet,” Tailsnikk said.

Yugyn spoke up, “Go through it.”

“What?” the bridge crew replied.

“The planet’s begun to fragment,” Yugyn clarified, “it’ll be riddled with massive fissures.”

“Large enough for this ship?” Tailsnikk was sceptical.

“Easily,” Yugyn said.

“Yapko, plot a course.”

“But Captain!” Tailsnikk’s thorns bristled rapidly.

“The boy knows,” Korymsus stated.

“Aye.” Yapko steered the ship toward the fractured planet. The true scale of the fissures quickly became evident, forming immense caverns of blackened rock. The ship’s intense running lights did little to lessen the enormity of the diffusing slabs of dead crust.

“There,” Tailsnikk pointed. “There it is!”

The ship’s engine flicker could be seen as the broken planet thinned into smaller masses.

“Disable its engines,” Korymsus said, “and prepare for boarding!”

“Aye, Captain!” Tailsnikk left the bridge to rally the crew.

“Yugyn, remain here, for the sake of my conscience.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Very good. You have the bridge, Yugyn.”

Yugyn sat to the Captain’s chair as the bridge was cleared. He raised his radial interface and stared at the construct, studying it for some time. Was it truly beyond possibility?

“Oh, Yugyn.”

He closed his interface. “Captain?”

“Yes, my boy. I would like you to join us. Yapko will collect you at the airlock.”

“Yes, Captain.”

The enemy vessel was gloomy and shambolic, its corridors littered with corpses and various alien biofluids. Reaching the bridge, it would seem Korymsus' crew had spared no one.

"Yugyn," Korymsus greeted him happily, "this ship's navigational system is locked. Can you hack it?"

"Of course." He activated his interface.

Tailsnikk snorted. "He's better than a crack-bar."

"It's a rudimentary perpetuity cipher," Yugyn commented.

"I can't even say that," Tailsnikk remarked.

"Done."

"Excellent, my boy."

Skysha accessed the computer.

"Rendezvous location?" Korymsus inquired.

"Emphcetia Three," Skysha replied.

"Yugyn, can you download their approach-codes?"

"Yes."

"Then let us be on our way."

RECOVERY

Yugyn held the blade in both hands, extended from his body.

"Now, turn to block my attack."

Yugyn turned the spatharge, raised it.

"Now, activate the shield to repel my blade."

Yugyn did so, rebounding Korymsus' blade.

"Very good. Now, we do it faster."

They went through the sequence again.

"And, again," Korymsus commanded. "Faster!"

Again they went through it successfully and once more even faster.

"Now, as if your life were at stake!"

When Yugyn deflected the attack Korymsus drew on him and fired. The energy bolt hit at an incredibly low intensity, but nonetheless hurt while knocking him off his feet.

“You must be prepared to deploy the shield at all times.” His pistol went back to his hip.

“Did you have to shoot me to prove that point?”

Korymsus helped him up. “You do not have much experience with weapons.”

“No. I’m a scientist.”

“Yet even weapons are built by scientists.”

“That’s not my field.”

“Which is?”

“Xeno-biology and genetics.”

“And your implant?”

“A gift from my father. To accelerate my education.”

“I would imagine your mind moves much more quickly than that of the average human.”

“Yes.”

“You moved exceedingly quickly through that maneuver. In truth, I fired on you due to defensive instinct.”

“Honestly?”

“Yes. You surprised me.”

Yugyn smiled.

“Skysha is our technical expert, perhaps she can modify a spatharge to work in conjunction with your interface.”

Yugyn nodded and smiled again, realizing the possibilities.

Korymsus sheathed his spatharge and lightly tapped Yugyn’s wrist. “There are times, out here in the

void, when the universe whispers and I hear of the Expanse and a vault of forbidden technology.”

“Rumors. I’ve heard them.”

“Could they be true?”

“To my knowledge, no.”

“And yet the Expanse has prohibited so much, technology lost to us, one and all.”

“They have, yes.”

“Temporal looping, quantum destabilization weapons,” the Captain seemed to be noting his favorites, “even revivification, the latter of which served your species well.”

“My great-great-grandfather fought in the Eradication Wars.”

“No doubt a Hyper-Marine?”

“Yes.”

“Then there is a warrior in your blood.”

“For Kahs’umii’s sake, I hope so.”

“Captain, we’ve reached Emphcetia Three,” Skysha reported.

Emphcetia Three was a small, but habitable moon, the third in orbit around a gaseous planet, which Korymsus had them on the far side of.

“Tell me, Yugyn, does the Terraphage affect gas planets?” asked the Captain.

“Any stellar body with a dynamic core.”

“It attacks the core then?” Yapko asked.

“It begins in the core, and rises outward circumferentially. Life fails on every level.”

“And you have yet to discover a cause?” Korymsus asked.

Yugyn nodded. “The reaction is horrifically evident, but the cause is not.”

“If I may, logic would dictate that your perpetrator is invisible,” the Captain said.

“And if we cannot see it, nor quantify or examine it, it cannot exist.”

“And the crisis continues unabated,” Korymsus said.

“And so the dilemma.”

“They’ve detected us,” Skysha said.

“Transmitting approach codes,” said Yapko.

“Accepted. Cleared for approach.”

Korymsus set himself on the edge of his chair.

“Take us in!”

The Echidna quickly rounded the planet.

“Full scan, Skysha,” Korymsus ordered.

“Fifteen ships,” she reported.

“Ehxinus?” Korymsus asked.

“No sign of The Malefic —Captain, I’ve got The Reckoning.”

“My ship!” he gasped. “Isolate the scan, who’s on it?”

“Seems to be a skeleton crew.”

“Go in fast,” Korymsus stood, “disable every ship in range and dock with The Reckoning. Tailsnikk, prepare for boarding.”

“Aye-aye, Captain,” he said happily.

The enemy convoy was too slow to react, The Echidna struck with purpose and docked with The Reckoning. Tailsnikk made short work of the brigands manning the ship that had been Korymsus’ home for over a decade.

“We’re home, Captain,” Tailsnikk reported.

“Shall we finish them off, Captain?” Yapko asked.

“No, let them limp home. We’re returning to Sulfur Jet.”

RETURN

Yugyn could not support Korymsus' ferocious push into Reh'Keevva's inner sanctum, but he could not stop it either. Yugyn's only option was to follow.

Tailsnikk incapacitated the final two guards and pushed through the doors into Reh'Keevva's sanctuary. The Ven'Shevanii was soaking in a pool of thick oily fluid, steaming and aromatic. Her head surfaced fully, her once turquoise skin had turned a pale pink with flecks of pastel blue. She extended her arms along the back rim and glared at her visitors.

"Was the ship not to your liking?" Reh'Keevva asked.

"It's enchanting," Korymsus replied, "but I am returning it."

"May I ask why?"

"I've found The Reckoning."

"And Ehxinus?"

"I had hoped you would be kind enough to tell me where he is."

"Information—"

"—is not your business, I know. Yet you knew D'jedkar was here."

"Yes. The Kresh'idan was among the girls he offered me."

"Then why not simply say so? We could have had the boy's beloved and all of us been happy."

"I didn't want you to know I had any involvement with Ehxinus."

"Did you know he was going to betray me?"

"I did warn you."

"And the Echidna?"

“Well,” her hands coiled upward, “I couldn’t outright apologize.”

“She is a fine ship.”

“Well, ships come and go all the time, but good friends are harder to find.”

“And even harder to keep,” Korymsus said pointedly.

“Indeed.”

“And rescuing the boy? Was that ... happenstance?”

“Yes. I was trying to reach D’jedkar before he could implicate me. I found the boy trapped and made a choice.”

“I didn’t get the chance to thank you, Reh’Keevva,” Yugyn said.

“You’re welcome, child.”

“And Ehxinus?” Korymsus asked.

“Fine!” Reh’Keevva swept her arms through the fluid. “I’ll give you his location, toward the restoration of our friendship.”

“That is kind of you, Reh’Keevva, and I’ll return the Echidna.”

“No, I want Yugyn to have it.”

“Me?” he gasped.

“Yes. You may have need of a ship.” She moved to the edge of the pool and activated a console. “Link to my workstation.”

Yugyn initiated his interface and linked.

“There, they are now yours, as is the Echidna.”

“Forgive me, Your Ladyship, they?”

“Cargo Bay Three.” She exhaled and sank into the pool. “Container three-three-six.” Reh’Keevva relaxed, closing her eyes. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m recuperating.”

Cargo Bay Three was as large as any other part of Sulfur Jet. As it was their objective was on the thirty-third level of a one hundred level complex.

“Here,” Korymsus said. “Three-three-six.”

Yugyn disengaged the lock; inside the container stood thirteen sleek automata, dark crimson in color and fully armed.

“Brethren-drones,” Tailsnikk said.

“Corsair class,” Korymsus added. “My, boy, you have your crew.”

Yugyn activated the drones.

The lead automaton came to attention, eyes gleaming. “Your orders, Captain Solonus?”

“My, my,” Korymsus said, “a captain no less.”

“I’ll change that,” Yugyn said.

“No,” Korymsus objected. “Keep it, it suits you.”

“Ehxinus is waiting,” Tailsnikk said.

“And so he is. Shall we get underway, Captain Solonus?”

Yugyn nodded. “Aye.”

REUNION

Yugyn could not deny the isolation he felt in the Captain’s chair on the bridge of the Echidna, despite the robotic crew.

“Remember,” Korymsus said via the comm, “debilitate The Shackle first, and then assist us with the remainder of the fleet.”

“Understood,” Yugyn replied.

“When you board The Shackle stay behind your crew, they will keep you alive, Captain Solonus. I’ll not stand for any foolhardiness on your part.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“And that spatharge is only for defense,” Skysa said.

“Korymsus told me there’s no such thing as a defensive weapon.”

“I did at that.”

“Captain, you could’ve learned Ehxinus’ location from any member of that convoy, why press Reh’Keevva for it?”

“Why? My boy, there was simply no other way to go about it.”

“I see.”

“Here we go, boy. Have courage.”

The Echidna broke off from The Reckoning and sliced across the rear of The Shackle, striking at its engines. A second volley debilitated the ship’s power and it listed as Yugyn’s crew pursued other targets.

Korymsus had blasted a great hole in the side of The Malefic, clearly he had no intention of boarding it to finish Ehxinus off personally.

The Echidna hit the remnants of the fleet hard, dealing lethal strikes. The ships exploded outright; else they splintered hurling debris into the void of space.

“To your beloved now, Yugyn.”

“Aye, Captain, and thank you.”

As soon as The Echidna docked the Corsairs surged relentlessly through The Shackle. Yugyn stayed behind them at every turn; when the unit divided, he stayed with the Commander.

Toward the bow of the ship Yugyn heard a scream.

“This way.” The Commander turned toward it and rallied his squad. There was an open doorway at the end of the corridor and a harrowing, albeit familiar weeping within.

“Are you out there, human?”

“I-I’m here!”

D’jedkar laughed. “If you want your woman alive, come in alone.”

The commander of the Corsairs turned to him. “Captain?”

“It’s all right. I’ll go.”

“Aye, Captain.”

Yugyn stepped past his crew and entered the cabin alone.

“Yugyn!” Kahs’umii was on her knees, hands bound.

“Boldajaks are incapable of what you call love, human.”

“Then I pity you.”

D’jedkar chuckled. “It’s you who should be pitied! Risking your life for this.” He shoved Kahs’umii to the floor. “Hold, human!” D’jedkar’s heavy spatharge stopped Yugyn’s anxious advance.

“What do you want?” he shouted.

“You want this?” Planted on her sensitive spine the Boldajak’s fat foot forced a scream from her. “I want you to fight for it!”

Yugyn drew his spatharge and nodded.

D’jedkar chuckled and bounded; Yugyn went to one knee under the strike, quickly rotated his blade and repelled the Boldajak.

“The first lesson,” D’jedkar said. “If that’s as far as you got this will be quick.” D’jedkar swung wide repeatedly, toying with him, laughing all the while.

“Pathetic!” D’jedkar flung the spatharge at him; Yugyn deflected it and was struck full in the chest by the Boldajak’s fist.

Yugyn collapsed, wheezing, pain spreading through his torso.

D'jedkar circled back and picked Kahs'umii up by the neck. "Now, I'll show you how easily slaves are broken."

Yugyn brought his forearm up.

"Don't cover your eyes, human." He put a foot firmly upon her legs; Yugyn saw the muscles in the Boldajak's arm flex and erupt, a second energy bolt burned through D'jedkar's chest, then a third, a fourth, and a fifth set light to his bloated head.

The Corsairs marched into the cabin as their Commander knelt aside Yugyn. "Are you all right, Captain?"

Yugyn nodded. "Kahs'umii," he breathed.

The Corsairs unshackled her and brought her to him. Kahs'umii fell to her knees and cradled Yugyn's face.

"You came for me." Milky tears were streaming from her eyes.

"There was nothing else I could do."

She kissed him, her lips honeyed by her tears. "I love you."

"And I you."

With the Corsairs in a protective circle around them, Kahs'umii lay at his side and pressed her face to his.

She smiled. "You came for me." Again she kissed him, stroked his cheek and whispered, "You came for me."

REBIRTH

Yugyn escorted Kahs'umii onto the bridge of The Echidna.

"This is your ship?"

"Our ship." He sat her in the Captain's chair. "We can go anywhere we choose."

She stared out at the stars. “Anywhere.”
He knelt before her. “Where do you want to go?”
“Where we can be together.”
“As you wish.”
“But where?”
“If we cannot find a place, then we will build one.”



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